

Central African Republic: UN chief hails signing of new peace agreement

Following the signing of a peace agreement between the Government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and 14 non-state armed groups active in the country on Wednesday, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, [congratulated](#) all stakeholders and encouraged them to now “live up to their commitments”.

CAR has been grappling with conflict since 2012, as fighting between the mostly Christian anti-Balaka militia and the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition killed thousands and left two out of three civilians dependent on humanitarian aid. In 2013, armed groups seized the capital and then President François Bozizé was forced to flee. After a brief period of reduced violence in 2015, and elections held in 2016, fighting intensified again at the end of the year.

[Peace talks](#) had started on 24 January this year in Khartoum, Sudan, and lasted 10 days under the auspices of the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR, led by the African Union (AU) with UN support. The deal was agreed in Khartoum, but formally-signed on Wednesday in CAR’s capital, Bangui.

Mr. Guterres commended the stakeholders for the successful conclusion of the talks, highlighting the “leadership role” of the AU and encouraged “all stakeholders to live up to their commitments in the implementation period”.

He reiterated the United Nations’ commitment to assist the Central African Republic “at this critical stage”, and called “on neighbouring countries, regional organizations and all international partners to support the courageous steps that Central Africans have made to bring lasting peace and stability in their country”.

Among other recent positive developments towards stability and accountability in the Central African Republic, political coordinator of the mainly Christian anti-Balaka militia faction, Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona, was [transferred](#) two weeks ago to the [International Criminal Court](#) to face accusations of crimes against humanity and war crimes. He had been arrested on 12 December last year in France, on a warrant for crimes allegedly committed in CAR during 2013 and 2014.

As the Central African Republic enters this new phase, the UN chief announced on Wednesday also that Mankeur Ndiaye of Senegal will be his new Special Representative to the country, mandated to head the UN’s stabilization mission there ([MINUSCA](#)). He succeeds Parfait Onanga-Anyanga of Gabon, who had been leading the Mission since August 2015.

The UN Secretary-General said he was “grateful” for Mr. Onanga-Anyanga’s

“unwavering commitment”, stating that his “leadership, integrity, personal commitment and tireless efforts have been crucial, including in support of the ongoing peace process as part of the Panel of Facilitators of the African Initiative”.

[Largest joint UN humanitarian convoy of the war, reaches remote Syrian settlement](#)

The largest UN humanitarian convoy of the Syrian civil war reached the remote settlement of Rukban, on the border with Jordan on Wednesday, where it is delivering life-saving assistance to more than 40,000 displaced people, some of whom have been trapped there for years as the eight-year conflict grinds on.

The vulnerable inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are women and children, are living in desperate conditions that have worsened due to the harsh winter: at least eight young children have reportedly died in Rukban in recent weeks.

The convoy of 188 trucks –a joint operation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent – is delivering food, health and nutritional supplies, as well as hygiene materials, education items and children’s recreational kits. In addition, vaccines for 10,000 children under the age of five have been sent with the convoy.

This large-scale delivery of essential humanitarian supplies to the extremely vulnerable in Rukban could not have happened a moment too soon – *UN Syria Coordinator, Sajjad Malik*

“This large-scale delivery of essential humanitarian supplies to the extremely vulnerable in Rukban could not have happened a moment too soon”, said UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Mr. [Sajjad Malik](#) in a statement released by the UN on Wednesday. “While this delivery of assistance will provide much-needed support, it is only a temporary measure. A long-term, safe, voluntary and dignified solution for tens of thousands of people, many of whom have been staying at the Rukban settlement for more than two years in desperate conditions, is urgently needed.”

The humanitarian supplies provided during this convoy were chosen based on the findings of a needs assessment carried out during the previous convoy to reach the outpost, in November 2018. Monitoring will also take place during

the current convoy by the UN and Red Crescent teams to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches civilians in need.

In order to bring about a situation where the displaced people at the settlement can return home, or to a place of their choosing, the UN and Red Crescent will carry out a survey to consult with them on their wishes and priorities. In the Wednesday statement, the UN underlined the fact that it urges all parties to allow safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all people in need in Syria in line with their obligations under International Humanitarian Law.

In the last three years, tens of thousands have fled to Rukban from ISIL or Da'esh extremist-held parts of Syria being targeted by Russian and U.S.-led coalition air strikes, according to news reports.

The camp lies inside a "deconfliction zone" set up by US-backed coalition, Russian and Syrian Government forces, which has reportedly encouraged many of Rukban's inhabitants to stay rather than go back to their homes in areas under Government control where they fear retribution by the Syrian army.

[With millions of girls 'at risk' today of genital mutilation, UN chief calls for zero tolerance](#)

"It denies them their dignity, endangers their health and causes needless pain and suffering, [even death](#)", the UN chief added.

FGM – sometimes called female circumcision – involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for no medical reason, and results in severe physical and mental health consequences for girls and women.

According to Mr. Guterres, it "is rooted in gender inequalities and power imbalances – and it sustains them by limiting opportunities for girls and women to realize their rights and full potential".

In cultures that condone FGM, it is usually performed by a traditional practitioner with crude instruments and without anesthetic.

"An estimated 200 million women and girls alive today have been subject to this harmful practice" the UN chief said, "and every year, almost four million girls are at risk".

About 80 per cent of women and girls who have undergone the procedure have had their clitoris and labia minora removed. Complications include severe

pain, hemorrhaging, sepsis, urethra damage, painful sexual intercourse and other sexual dysfunction.

FGM comes in many forms:

- Clitoridectomy – partially or totally removal of the clitoris and/or prepuce.
- Excision – partially or totally removing the clitoris and the labia minora.
- Infibulation – narrowing the vaginal orifice by cutting and re-positioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora as a covering seal.
- Pricking, piercing, incising, scraping or cauterization.

Genital mutilation also has psychological repercussions, with many victims feeling anxious, depressed, incomplete and traumatized.

“The [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) call for the elimination of female genital mutilation by 2030”, the UN chief noted, adding that the UN “joins hands with global, regional and national actors in supporting holistic and integrated initiatives to achieve this objective”.

Tackling FGM is also part of the UN’s [Spotlight Initiative](#), launched in partnership with the European Union to end all forms of violence against women and girls.

While strong political commitment is yielding positive change in some countries, if current trends persist, Mr. Guterres underscored that “these advances will continue to be outpaced by rapid population growth where the practice is concentrated”.

“On this Day of Zero Tolerance, I call for increased, concerted and global action to end female genital mutilation and fully uphold the human rights of all women and girls,” concluded the Secretary-General.

‘Promote and protect’ women and girls

Both girls and boys participate in programs aiming at creating awareness on the negative effects of FGM as well as the need to implement Sustainable Development goal number 5 on Gender Equality. The programs take place at the UNFPA’s supported Masanga Cen, by Warren Bright/UNFPA Tanzania

While most of the girls and women who have been subject to FMG live in 28 African countries, and some in Asia, they are also increasingly found in Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States; primarily immigrants from Africa and southwestern Asia, according to a joint statement marking the day from the [UN Children’s Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), [UN Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#) and [UN Women](#).

All three work to advocate for global awareness to deal with the problem,

specifically by educating the public, health workers and FGM practitioners on its health and psychosocial consequences.

Their joint statement expressed their support of government and community efforts “to promote and protect the [health and development](#) of women and children”.

Since FGM concerns both the health and rights of women and children, WHO, UNICEF, and UNFPA each use their targeted strengths advocating against cutting, in a cross-agency collaboration, to complement the others.

WHO promotes medically and technically-based policies to eliminate the practice, while working through a research and development programme, shining a light on the issue as it relates to women’s health, reproductive and human rights.

UNICEF uses its field office and country programmes to, among other things, support community-based organizations engaged in information, education, communication and training on preventing FGM – particularly youth organizations and women’s groups on the dangers of the practice.

For its part, UNFPA continues to advocate against FGM by supporting the revision of national policies, laws, regulations and misinformed traditional practices pertaining to reproductive health.

Nearly two-thirds of children lack access to welfare safety net, risking ‘vicious cycle of poverty’

More than six in 10 children globally lack access to social protection, leaving them particularly vulnerable to falling into chronic poverty, the UN said on Wednesday, warning also that some governments are cutting State cash entitlements, amid continuing economic uncertainty.

In a joint report by the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) and [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF), data shows that although a welfare safety net exists for 35 per cent of youngsters overall, that figure drops to 28 per cent in Asia and just 16 per cent in Africa.

When Member States ratified the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development, agreed in 2015 with its 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#), they agreed to the global initiative’s top priority, namely eradicating poverty.

State benefits play vital role in preventing poverty

State benefits from public funds, in the form of cash grants, “play a vital role in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability”, the report insists. Of 139 countries covered by the report, on average, they spend 1.1 per cent of their wealth on children up to 14 years old.

“There is a huge underinvestment gap that needs to be covered,” said Isabel Ortiz, Director of the Social Protection Department at ILO. “The numbers worsen by region. In Africa, for instance, children represent 40 per cent of the African population overall, but only 0.6 per cent is actually invested in social protection for children.”

According to the joint ILO/UNICEF report, one in five children globally lives in extreme poverty – defined as less than \$1.90 a day – and almost one in two lives in “moderate” poverty, under \$3.20 a day.

Children are twice as likely as adults to live in extreme poverty, the report continues, with lack of access to education and poor nutrition among the most significant long-term impacts.

“While social protection cash transfers are vital for children, they shouldn’t stand alone,” said David Stewart, Chief of Child Poverty and Social Protection Unit at UNICEF. “They have to be combined with other services – if a child is living in a household with sufficient resources and if they don’t have access to educational health, it doesn’t make a big difference. So, it’s about combining these interventions together.”

All countries have to resources to support children

In addition to the call for governments to invest in universal health coverage and tackle other issues including child labour, the UN report maintains that such measures are not a “privilege” of wealthy States.

A number of developing countries have achieved, or nearly achieved, universal social protection, it maintains. These include Argentina, Brazil, Chile and South Africa. In Mongolia, which has also achieved universal social protection for children, austerity measures threaten these gains however.

“Recently, due to fiscal pressures from international financial institutions, they have been advising the Government to target the universal benefit, Ms. Ortiz explained. “So it’s one of these cases where fiscal consolidation or austerity short-term...may be having long-term impacts on children. So the UN message is to try to look at the longer-term.”

Improving all children’s lives ‘is an issue of political will’

“Child poverty can be reduced overnight with adequate social protection,” Ms. Ortiz said, adding that improving the lives of all children “is an issue of priorities and political will – even the poorest countries have fiscal space to extend social protection”.

Highlighting China's success in achieving universal health and pension coverage in just four years, is an example of what can be done. The ILO official maintained that "ultimately, the extension of social protection is always about Government's will. It is because a Government realizes about the important developmental impacts of protecting people, particularly those that are vulnerable, across the lifecycle, so in times of childhood, in old age, in times of maternity, protections are particularly needed."

Dramatic drop in South Sudan political violence since peace agreement signing

Since the signing of a September 2018 deal between the South Sudanese President Salva Kiir and his political rival and former deputy Riek Machar to end conflict in the country, political violence has "dropped dramatically," David Shearer, head of the [UN Mission in South Sudan](#) told reporters on Tuesday.

Speaking to reporters at UN Headquarters in New York, Mr. Shearer said that many "positive things" have happened since the peace agreement, including several peace meetings around the country, and the integration of opposition and Government figures in the armed forces.

Despite the fall in political violence, conflict is still ongoing, said Mr. Shearer, pointing to, among others, ethnic violence that has led to killings, and in the South of the country, where the fighters of Thomas Cirillo's National Salvation Front have been involved in clashes with Government forces.

Although Mr. Shearer expressed concern at a loss of momentum in the peace process, with recent meetings lacking substance or real outcomes, he stated that, overall, progress has been much better than expected, and urged the international community to "speak as one voice," sending the message that the peace process is the only game in town.

Mr. Shearer's press conference coincided with an [appeal](#) for funds from the UN [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#) to support displaced people and returnees in South Sudan. The UN Agency is appealing for \$122 million, to help nearly one million people, and over 80 humanitarian and development partners throughout 2019.

In the five years since conflict broke out in South Sudan, more than four million people have fled their homes, and almost two million are displaced within the country. Since the peace deal between the warring parties was agreed last September, there have been signs of stability, leading to the prospect of more people returning to their homes: during his press

conference,

Mr. Shearer, who is also the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in South Sudan, said that the success of the peace agreement will be partly measured by the extent to which people go back to their home towns and villages.

Welcoming this development, Jean-Philippe Chauzy, IOM South Sudan Chief of Mission, cautioned that "although some people have decided to return home, many are still living in displacement sites. They will not be able to return in 2019. So, despite the signing of the revitalized peace agreement, conflict related displacement continues, albeit on a smaller scale than in the past."