

UN relief wing appeals for record \$22.5 billion in aid for 2018

1 December 2017 – A record level of aid funding – more than \$22.5 billion – is needed to deliver lifesaving assistance around the world in 2018, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator said on Friday.

Announcing the [Global Humanitarian Appeal](#), Mark Lowcock said that an estimated 136 million people face urgent needs because of protracted conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics and displacement.

“Were we better financed, we would save more lives. But we would also protect more futures [...],” he said, noting that it costs us about £230 a year to provide the lifesaving comprehensive assistance that we are talking about through these response plans – about 77 cents a day.

“That’s one of the cheapest investments you can make in the safety of humanity for the future, so we are hoping that, on the basis of the quality of the plans we will be able to reach higher levels of funding than we have both said we have achieved for this year,” he explained.

He noted that the amount of the Appeal is \$300 million more than what was sought last year. “And that partly reflects the fact that although the agencies are getting faster, more efficient and more cost effective in what they are doing, the cost of operating in some of the places where we have to operate is growing because they are highly insecure and protecting the aid operation is becoming more challenging.”

In Yemen, a child dies every 10 minutes, said Mr. Lowcock, who is also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, adding that the country is likely to remain the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Twenty million of the country’s 25 million people are in need of assistance, and seven to eight million “right on the brink of famine,” Mark Lowcock added.

He repeated his call for the Saudi-led coalition to continue unwinding its blockade – put in place after a rocket attack by Houthi fighters three weeks ago – warning of a humanitarian crisis the like of which the world “has not seen in decades” if it is not done.

Acknowledging that humanitarian aid on its own could not solve chronic instability, the UN aid chief said it was a personal priority to work with governments on development and peacebuilding to address the root causes of their problems.

The fact that this year’s appeal is higher than in 2016 reflects growing needs, not only in countries in the international spotlight, such as Yemen, Myanmar and Syria.

In Africa alone, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya and Somalia are all expected to see more civilian suffering.

Many countries had seen marginal progress in the last year however, according to the UN's humanitarian coordinating agency, OCHA. These include Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Mali and Ukraine.

Also in Geneva for the UN appeal, Save the Children International warned that youngsters are among the most vulnerable victims of humanitarian crises.

The organization's head Helle Thorning-Schmidt told journalists how protracted conflict was "stealing" children's lives twice; first when they were displaced by conflict, and then for a second time when they were unable to return home.

She told of tremendous suffering in Yemen, where children were dying of diseases that had been overcome 100 years ago elsewhere, before adding that her aid teams had no access to other vulnerable communities in countries including Libya and North Korea.

[World AIDS Day: If everyone, everywhere realizes right to health, epidemic can be defeated, says UN](#)

1 December 2017 – The world will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which include the target of ending AIDS by 2030 without people attaining their right to health, the United Nations said Friday, marking [World AIDS Day](#) with a strong appeal for the full realization of this fundamental right by everyone, everywhere.

The [right to health](#) is a fundamental human right everybody has the right to the enjoyment of the [highest attainable standard](#) of physical and mental health, as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) said in his message on the Day.

Indeed, the right to health is linked to all the [SDGs](#) and is interrelated with a range of other rights, including the rights to sanitation, food, decent housing, healthy working conditions and a clean environment.

He explained that it includes: equal access to health care; adequate health-care infrastructure; respectful and non-discriminatory health-care services; and that healthcare must be medically appropriate and of good quality.

“But the right to health is more than that,” he continued, saying that with it, “people’s dreams and promises can be fulfilled.”

Mr. Sidibé pointed out the most marginalized and affected still face challenges in accessing urgently-needed health and social services, asserting “we all must continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the people being left behind and demand that no one is denied their human rights.”

“For all the successes, AIDS is not yet over. But by ensuring that everyone, everywhere accesses their right to health, it can be,” he concluded.

In her message, Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), stressed the right to quality education for all, because the two goals “[health and education](#)” go hand in hand. “This linkage stands at the heart of the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development and the UNAIDS 2016-2021 Strategy, she explained.

As outlined in UNESCO’s *Strategy on Education for Health and Well-Being: Contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals*, health and education are mutually reinforcing: healthy learners learn better, and better-educated learners are healthier.

“They are also mutually dependent “without the right to education we cannot truly fulfil the right to health,” Ms. Azoulay continued, stressing that in a world where young people “especially girls and young women” bear a disproportionate burden of HIV and AIDS, “we all must recognize that comprehensive sexuality education is central to their right to health, and to the health of all societies.”

Picking up that thread in her message, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women, said that according to UNAIDS, every four minutes, three young women become infected with HIV.

“They are [clearly not enjoying their right to health](#), nor will they, until we are able to reverse the inequalities and discrimination that fuel HIV spread. Those whose health and future are currently least prioritized must become our focus, if we are to achieve the changes we seek,” she said.

As such, leaving no woman or girl behind in the HIV response means ensuring their meaningful participation and engagement in designing that response, improving access to services and demanding their right to health.

“To do that, we foster women’s voices and leadership and support their place at decision-making tables,” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka continued, adding that in 2016, UN Women supported networks of women living with HIV in 31 countries to increase their engagement in the national HIV responses.

“This World AIDS Day, UN Women calls for a commitment to prioritize and reach all the women and girls being left behind in the HIV response: every last woman and girl.”

Threat of complacency

Meanwhile, according to the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), in 2016, 120,000 children under age 14 died of AIDS-related causes while hourly, 18 were newly infected.

The 2017 UNICEF Statistical Update on Children and AIDS, launched Friday, projects that if current trends persist, there will be 3.5 million new adolescent HIV infections by 2030.

"It is unacceptable that we continue to see so many children dying from AIDS and so little progress made to protect adolescents from new HIV infections," said Dr. Chewe Luo, Chief of HIV for UNICEF.

"The AIDS epidemic is not over; it remains a threat to the lives of children and young people and more can and should be done to prevent it," he added.

A UNICEF analysis of demographic trends and new HIV data reveals that targets set in the [2020 Super-Fast-Track](#) framework developed in 2016 to end AIDS among children, will not be achieved.

While noting that mother-to-child HIV transmissions have declined and two million new infections in children have been averted, UNICEF warns that such progress must not lead to complacency, saying that progress in preventing, testing and treating HIV infections among adolescents has been unacceptably slow.

"To continue at this slow rate of progress is to gamble with the lives of children and commit future generations to a preventable life of HIV and AIDS," Dr. Luo added. "We must act urgently in order to sustain any gains we have made in the past decade."

To address HIV-response gaps, UNICEF proposes utilising emerging innovations; scaling-up the response for children; and strengthening governments' capacity to collect of comprehensive, disaggregated testing and treatment data.

Innovative solutions must be adopted to speed up progress in preventing HIV infection of children and ensuring those living with HIV get the treatment they need.

[Syria: UN-supported talks in Geneva extended until mid-December](#)

30 November 2017 – Previewing what he said will be "not just a normal round of talks," Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria,

insisted Thursday there should be no preconditions heading into the current round of discussions aimed at resolving the over six-year-long conflict that has resulted in immense human suffering.

“We have [...] been talking about the rules of the game, and therefore reemphasizing: [no preconditions](#), Staffan de Mistura told reporters in Geneva, after meeting with the Government and opposition delegations.

The current round of talks will be taking place against “quite a backdrop of intense diplomatic activity” in recent weeks to find a political solution to the Syria crisis, following important meetings in Viet Nam’s DaNang, Russia’s Sochi, and Saudi Arabia’s Riyadh.

And after the territorial losses of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as ISIL/Da’esh) in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, “there has been now a moment of truth; we need to find a political solution.”

So, he said, in what is “not just a normal round of talks,” if preconditions are raised: “I immediately stop the conversation and say, ‘Sorry, have you heard what the Security Council has said, have you heard what in fact many senior political leaders have been saying? No preconditions, let’s start the discussions again now.’”

The UN mediator noted that fact that the warring parties are still not meeting in the same room is by no means a deal-breaker.

What is important, he added, is “substance,” and the search for “commonalities” between the two delegations.

He also clarified that during the [intra-Syrian talks](#), the issue of the presidency did not come up.

“We have not discussed the issue of presidency. We have been discussing the [12 points/principles](#), and you will see they are of a broad nature but they have an impact on everything in the future constitution; and we have started addressing the issue about how to proceed on a new constitution. So that issue has not even come up,” said Mr. de Mistura, adding that he wants to believe that the “issue should come up with the Syrians through UN supervised elections according to Security Council [\[resolution 2254 \(2015\)\]](#).”

He also announced that the talks have been extended until mid-December.



Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, briefs the press during Intra-Syrian talks. Photo by Violaine Martin

Also, earlier Thursday, Jan Egeland, the UN Special Advisor for Syria, appealed for greater and more urgent efforts to enable safe evacuations of some 500 people, including 167 children, besieged eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus.

“Men with power are sitting with lists of children that are in urgent need of being evacuated, if not they will, many of them, die; and we still do not have the green light,” said Mr. Egeland, expressing hope that the evacuations are possible with the Government’s approval despite insecurity adding that calm could then be negotiated with both sides.

“It is heart breaking; it is intolerable; it will be a stain on our conscience for a very, very long time, unless it can happen very soon. I was told today that nine patients on this list have died,” he added.

According to estimates more than 400,000 people are trapped in eastern Ghouta, cut off from much needed food and relief assistance.

Yesterday, briefing the Security Council, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator had also [underscored the direness](#) of the situation there and called for urgent humanitarian access to ensure that the most vulnerable can be provided much needed support.

[Security Council hails ‘remarkable achievements’ one year after peace deal between Colombian Government and FARC-EP](#)

30 November 2017 – The Security Council on Thursday marked the one year anniversary of the signing and entry-into-force of the peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC-EP).

In a press statement, the Council circulated the document containing the [Agreement for Ending the Conflict](#) and building a lasting peace between the Government and FARC-EP, while congratulating the parties “for the remarkable achievements of the peace process.”

The historic peace accord ended the Western Hemisphere’s longest running conflict. The deal had been the culmination of four years of talks hosted in Havana, Cuba, between the two sides, and which had led to agreements on key issues such as political participation, land rights, illicit drugs and victims’ rights and transitional justice.

“The members of the Security Council applauded the leadership and commitment of the parties to implementing the agreement over the past 12 months, which has brought to an end over 50 years of conflict,” the Council said in a statement.

The Council members welcomed the successful completion of the FARC-EP's laying down of arms to UN monitors in August, calling it "a major milestone in the transition between war and peace."

"Colombia's peace process has sparked high hopes and expectations around the world and continues to provide inspiration for those seeking to end conflicts elsewhere," the statement continued.

It also reiterated the Council's "full support to the parties as they seek to turn the end of the conflict into a stable and lasting peace by working to fully implement the peace agreement beyond the laying down of arms."

Additionally, the Security Council members welcomed the report of the visit to Colombia in November by the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffery Feltman, and noted his statement in Bogotá on 15 November 2017, particularly regarding the importance of advancing the reincorporation of former FARC-EP combatants into civilian life with a comprehensive strategy and concrete action plans and resources to enable success.

The statement also noted "the importance of addressing the security situation in the former conflict zones, following some attacks, including on community leaders, human rights defenders and former FARC combatants, by increasing State presence and governance to secure a lasting peace."

In this regard, the Council members urged the parties, with the support of the relevant civilian state institutions and security forces, "to redouble efforts to accelerate progress in implementation over the coming weeks and months, in accordance with the provisions set out in the peace agreement, including with respect to enacting the necessary legislation."

According to the statement, they further underlined the importance of "upholding the political participation of the FARC-EP now that they have laid down their arms, in accordance with the peace agreement" and "the international community remaining closely engaged to continue to support and encourage Colombia's work to implement the peace agreement."

The Council members recalled resolutions 2366 (2017) and 2377 (2017), which established and mandated the [UN Verification Mission](#) to verify implementation by the parties of the process of political, economic and social reincorporation of the FARC-EP and the implementation of personal and collective security guarantees.

They "appreciated the efforts of the Verification Mission to provide support and to encourage progress" and looked forward 26 December when the Secretary-General would submit the first 90-day report on its activities.

From thorny to tasty: UN agriculture agency looking at cactus as climate resilient food

30 November 2017 – With the reality of climate change becoming more real by the day, including its impact on food sources, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) is urging communities around the world not to take the prickly cactus for granted.

“Climate change and the increasing risks of droughts are strong reasons to [upgrade the humble cactus](#) to the status of an essential crop in many areas,” said Hans Dreyer, the Director of Plant Production and Protection Division at FAO, noting the plant’s potential.

According to the UN agency, cultivation of cactus pear is slowly catching on, in part, boosted by growing need for resilience in the face of drought, degraded soils and higher temperatures.

This was evident during the recent intense drought in southern Madagascar, where the plant – once viewed as a worthless invasive species – provided a crucial supply of food, forage and water for local people and their animals.

While most cacti are inedible, the *Opuntia* species – also referred to as prickly pear – has much to offer, especially if treated like a crop rather than a weed run wild.

“Today the agriculturally relevant *Opuntia ficus-indica* subspecies – whose spines have been bred out but return after stress events – is naturalized in 26 countries beyond its native range,” says FAO, adding: “Its hardy persistence makes it both a useful food of last resort and an integral part of sustainable agricultural and livestock systems.”

Historically, cactus’ culinary qualities have been a prominent feature in Mexico as well as the Italian island of Sicily, renowned for its gourmet tradition.

In Mexico alone, the yearly per capita consumption of *nopalitos* – the tasty young pads, known as *cladodes* – is 6.4 kilograms and the plant is grown on small farms (as primary or supplemental crop) and harvested in the wild on more than three million hectares.

Cactus as source of water and to lower greenhouse gas emissions

Aside from providing food, cactus also stores water in its pads, providing up to 180 tonnes of water per hectare – enough to sustain five adult cows.

This usefulness is all the more important during droughts, when livestock survival rate has been far higher on farms with cactus plantations.

And with pressure on water sources only projected to rise in the future, cactus could become one of the important crops for the 21st century.

Furthermore, there is evidence that yields in barley – a major cereal grain globally – rise when cactus is grown alongside it as a soil-improving alley crop, and there is research showing that use of cactus in cattle diets reduces the ruminants' methanogenesis (production of methane in the guts of animals, especially cattle and other ruminants), thus contributing to lower greenhouse gas emissions.