

Iraq: UN warns against 'collective punishment' of population with alleged ISIL ties

30 June 2017 – The United Nations human rights office has expressed concern over forced evictions of people alleged to have ties with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group, noting that such actions may amount to collective punishment that is in clear contravention of the Iraqi Constitution as well as human rights and humanitarian law.

“As Mosul is increasingly liberated from ISIL, we are seeing an alarming rise in threats, specifically of forced evictions, against those suspected of being ISIL members or whose relatives are alleged to be involved with ISIL – threats that have also been made in other areas,” [said](#) Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), at today’s press briefing in Geneva.

Fighting in Mosul is becoming ever more intense and concentrated as Iraqi national security forces, supported by the international coalition, push to retake the whole of the city from ISIL.

“We are extremely concerned at the situation of civilians in Mosul,” Mr. Colville said, reminding all parties to the conflict of their obligation to distinguish between civilians and combatants in armed conflict.

He said that OHCHR received reports of “night letters” left at families’ houses or distributed in neighbourhoods, including in Sharqat in Salahadin Governorate, Al Heet City in Al Anbar and Al-Qayyarah in Ninewa, as well as in Mosul City.

These letters typically warn people to leave by a particular date or face forced expulsion. Many of these threats are the result of tribal agreements that explicitly demand that families of ISIL-affiliated members be excluded from the area.

“People are at real risk of forced eviction from their homes and losing access to basic necessities, including adequate housing, food, access to health services and education,” Mr. Colville said, urging the Iraqi Government to take action to halt such imminent evictions or any type of collective punishment.

“Illegal forced evictions are acts of vengeance that are detrimental to national reconciliation and social cohesion,” he added.

On Thursday, Peter Hawkins, the representative of the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) in Iraq, called for the protection of children trapped in the Old City neighbourhood of western Mosul.

“Children are facing multiple threats to their lives. Those stranded in the

fighting are hiding in their basements, fearful of the next onslaught. Those who try to flee, risk being shot or wounded,” he [said](#) in a statement.

“The plight of these children and their survival must remain a top priority now and in the weeks and months to come,” he added.

Challenges abound as ‘significant’ numbers of displaced return within Syria, warns UNHCR

30 June 2017 – Citing “significant” returns of displaced persons to and within Syria, the United Nations refugee agency said today that while it will be scaling up its response to assist those coming back, it can neither promote nor facilitate returns given the security and humanitarian situation in the war-torn country.

According to estimates, more than 440,000 internally displaced people have returned to their homes during the first six months of this year. During the same period, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) has recorded over 31,000 Syrian refugees returning from neighbouring countries.

Seeking out family members, checking on property, and, in some cases, a real or perceived improvement in security conditions in parts of the country were the primary factors influencing those who decided to return, Andrej Mahecic, a spokesperson for the UN agency, told reporters in Geneva.

“While there is overall increased hope linked to the recent Astana and Geneva peace talks, [we] believe [conditions for refugees to return in safety and dignity are not yet in place in Syria](#),” he said, voicing concern over the sustainability of security improvements as well as significant protection risks in many return areas.

“At this stage, and while UNHCR will be investing to help, with other partners, to improve conditions in accessible areas inside Syria, refugee returns from host countries can neither be promoted nor facilitated by UNHCR at this stage,” he added.

RELATED: [Delays in access in Syria ‘will mean further death,’ warns top UN relief official](#)

In particular, access to displaced populations inside Syria remains a key challenge, noted Mr. Mahecic, highlighting that aid convoys are still unable to access regularly those areas that have become newly accessible.

Other challenges include limited livelihood opportunities, shortages of food

and water, and sporadic or non-existent health, education, social and other basic services. Many of Syria's schools have been damaged or destroyed and offer no possibility for education.

In the midst of this complex situation, UNHCR is pursuing a number of preparatory steps, in anticipation of the time when conditions for voluntary repatriation of refugees in conditions of safety and dignity are in place. However, resources remain a major constraint, hindering its efforts.

Of the \$304 million appeal for its operations to assist the displaced inside Syria in 2017, only \$103 million (about 33 per cent) has been received by UNHCR.

It is also seeking an additional \$150 million in 2017 to ramp up its delivery inside Syria to support both the displaced, returnees and other vulnerable people, and to help improve conditions in potential return areas.

The Syrian conflict, now into its seventh year, has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, displaced some 6.3 million within the country and forced 5.1 million to flee outside its borders. Also, more than 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance, including nearly 4.5 million in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

[UN rights chief decries 'unacceptable attack' on Al Jazeera and other media](#)

30 June 2017 – The United Nations human rights chief today expressed strong concern about international demands that Qatar close down the Al Jazeera network and other affiliated media outlets as “extraordinary, unprecedented and clearly unreasonable.”

A spokesperson for High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein told press in Geneva that “whether or not you watch it, like it, or agree with its editorial standpoints, Al Jazeera's Arabic and English channels are legitimate, and have many millions of viewers.”

Rupert Colville added that “the demand that they be summarily closed down is, in our view, [an unacceptable attack](#) on the right to freedom of expression and opinion.”

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in early June. The countries last week gave Qatar 10 days to comply with a list of demands to end the diplomatic showdown, including the shutdown of Al Jazeera.

The Office of the High Commissioner ([OHCHR](#)) said the dispute has been “taken

to a new level” with the inclusion of some fundamental rights and freedoms in the list of demands.

“To insist that such channels be shut down is extraordinary, unprecedented and clearly unreasonable,” stated Mr. Colville.

If Qatar were to comply, the move would “open a Pandora’s Box of powerful individual States or groups of States seriously undermining the right to freedom of expression and opinion in other States, as well as in their own,” he added.

The High Commissioner reiterated his call that all five Governments solve the ongoing matter in a calm, reasonable and lawful manner that does not impact on their own human rights, or those of other countries.

[On Asteroid Day, UN space agency urges international planning for potential impact threat](#)

30 June 2017 – The potential impact of an asteroid or comet hitting Earth could be catastrophic, a top United Nations official today warned, urging the international community to come together to jointly raise awareness and develop a plan to mitigate the danger.

Marking the first observance of International Asteroid Day, the Director of the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), said today was an opportunity to learn about the technological progress taking place around the world to both identify and counter asteroids.

“International cooperation is the best way to address the potential impact of an asteroid on our planet,” said Simonetta Di Pippo.

“Join us to raise awareness of the value of space technology to address global challenges, no matter where they come from and let’s work together for the benefit of all humankind.”

The Day, which will be marked annually on 30 June, is meant to “raise public awareness about the asteroid impact hazard and inform the public about the crisis communication actions to be taken at the global level in case of a credible near-Earth object threat,” according to the dedicated UN [website](#).

The General Assembly chose 30 June to mark the date in 1908 when a massive explosion above Tunguska, in Siberian Russia, caused by an asteroid, hit a forested area reportedly flattening some 80 million trees.

The incident was the Earth's largest asteroid impact in recorded history, according to the UN.

UNOOSA has said that it worked for many years to recognize asteroids or comets both considered near-earth objects (NEOs) as global issues demanding an international response.

Addressing such a hazard, including the identification of those objects that pose a threat of impact and planning a corresponding mitigation campaign, requires cooperative action in the interest of public safety on the part of the global community, the UN agency said.

Among most recent NEOs entering the Earth's atmosphere, a large fireball disintegrated in the skies over Chelyabinsk on 15 February 2013. The fireball is said to have travelled at a speed of 18.6 km per second and was estimated to carry the equivalent of 440 kilotons of TNT explosives.

[UN refugee agency 'extremely worried' about renewed violence in Central African Republic](#)

30 June 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency has voiced concern over a flow of people fleeing renewed violence in some parts of the Central African Republic, a country that has already seen a half million people internally displaced and another half million taking refuge in neighbouring countries.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) is extremely worried over the resurgence of violence being seen in parts of the Central African Republic, [said](#) UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic at today's press briefing in Geneva.

He said renewed violence has erupted in the towns of Zemio, Bria and Kaga Bandaro in southern and northern CAR as clashes are reported between self-defence groups and other armed groups. Civilians and humanitarian workers are also being targeted.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country of 4.5 million people into civil conflict in 2013. Violence in CAR has uprooted some 503,600 people inside the country, including more than 100,000 in 2017, and more than 484,000 have been registered as refugees in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Chad and the Republic of Congo.

Mr. Mahecic noted that in Zemio, close to the border with the DRC, UNHCR workers have reported intense heavy weapons fire since Tuesday. Some houses

close to UNHCR's office were burnt down. Over 1,000 people have fled their homes. Many are seeking refuge in a Catholic church in the town, while some 66 people have sought safety in the UNHCR compound – among them terrified women and children in fear of their lives, he added.

In the town of Bria, several hundred kilometres northeast of the capital, Bangui, clashes were reported on June 20 that continued for three consecutive days, he said.

Reports suggest a camp hosting some 2,400 internally displaced people in the Ndourou IV district is now completely empty with its whole population having fled the recent attacks.

Indiscriminate attacks in Bria have left some 136 people dead and 36 wounded, with 600 houses burned and an additional 180 looted.

In a separate incident, unidentified armed men tried to break into UNHCR accommodation in Kaga Bandaro in the north of the country on Wednesday night with the intention of attacking staff and looting belongings. The attack was thwarted by the UN peacekeeping forces there.

UNHCR teams were able to distribute relief items including plastic sheets, blankets, mats, mosquito nets, kitchen sets, buckets and soap to more than 5000 households in accessible parts of Bria over the past three weeks – despite the fragile security situation.

“UNHCR renews its call on all parties to the conflict in the area to immediately end attacks against civilians and aid workers. UNHCR is also seeking immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to assist those affected by the recent wave of violence,” Mr. Mahecic said.