Venezuela: UN human rights chief regrets opposition leader being blocked to travel

19 May 2017 – Amid rising violence in Venezuela, the United Nations human rights chief has expressed regret that the Latin American country's opposition leader was allegedly blocked from leaving the country for New York, where they were planning to meet.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has said on Twitter that he regrets that Henrique Capriles was unable to travel and hoped that the incident is not a reprisal linked to the planned meeting with him in New York today, Mr. Zeid's spokesperson, Rupert Colville, told reporters in Geneva.

The spokesperson said that the High Commissioner would go ahead with a meeting this afternoon in New York with Mr. Capriles' lawyer who would share a report prepared by Mr. Capriles.

"We find the rising tensions in Venezuela very alarming, and incidents like that involving Mr. Capriles yesterday are unlikely to help reduce tensions," the spokesperson said.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also regrets the continued loss of lives during the political unrest, he said. According to the latest figure, 42 deaths were confirmed in the context of the protests.

OHCHR is monitoring the situation from outside the country, but it would be good to be able to visit the country as the situation is very worrying, the spokesperson said.

He expressed concerns about allegations of excessive use of force by security forces, reports of violence by armed groups, as well as reports that people detained during the protests are being brought before military tribunals, not civilian courts.

OHCHR also urges demonstrators to protest peacefully.

UN-backed treaty on mercury to enter

into force; 'pivotal moment' in combat against harmful chemicals

19 May 2017 – The world took an historic step forward in the fight against mercury poisoning as the European Union and seven of its member States ratified the first new global convention related to the environment and health in close to a decade, according to the United Nations.

"The Minamata Convention demonstrates a global commitment to protecting human health and the environment." said Secretary General, António Guterres in a press [statement](). "Today's action shows how problems that affect us all can also bring us together for the common good."

Having been signed by 128 countries, the [Minamata Convention on Mercury]() will come into force in 90 days – on 16 August 2017 – after being ratified by Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania and Sweden.

According to the UN Environmental Programme ([UNEP]()), the Convention commits governments to specific measures to control the entire "lifecycle" of man-made mercury pollution, one of the world's top ten chemical threats to health.

This includes banning new mercury mines, phasing-out existing ones, regulating artisanal and small-scale gold mining, and reducing emissions and mercury use. Since the element is indestructible, the Convention also stipulates conditions for interim storage and disposal of mercury waste.

UNEP also pointed out that there are no safe levels of exposure to mercury and everyone is at risk because the dangerous heavy metal has spread to the remotest parts of the earth and can be found in everyday products, including cosmetics, lightbulbs, batteries and teeth fillings.

Children, newborn and unborn babies are most vulnerable, along with populations who eat contaminated fish, those who use mercury at work, and people who live near of a source of mercury pollution or in colder climates where the dangerous heavy metal tends to accumulate.

"Who wants to live in a world where putting on makeup, powering our phones and even buying a wedding ring depends on exposing millions of people to the [risk of mercury poisoning]()?" said UN Environment chief Erik Solheim.

"But with mercury we have solutions that are as obvious as the problem itself. There are alternatives to all of mercury's current applications, such as newer, safer industrial processes. Big and small countries can all play a role – as can the man and woman in the street, just by changing what they buy and use," he added.

Up to 8,900 metric tonnes of mercury are emitted each year. It can be released naturally through the weathering of mercury-containing rocks, forest fires and volcanic eruptions, but significant emissions also come from human

processes, particularly coal burning and artisanal and small-scale gold mining. Mining alone exposes up to 15 million workers in 70 different countries to mercury poisoning, including child labourers.

Other man-made sources of mercury pollution include the production of chlorine and some plastics, waste incineration and use of mercury in laboratories, pharmaceuticals, preservatives, paints and jewellery.

Taking its name from the most severe mercury poisoning disaster in history, in 1956 local villages suffered convulsions, psychosis, loss of consciousness and coma from eating the fish in Minamata Bay, Japan, in which industrial wastewaters had been dumped since the 1930s. Thousands of people were certified as having directly suffered from mercury poisoning, now known as Minamata disease.

Thousands of migrants rescued on Mediterranean in a single day – UN agency

19 May 2017 – Nearly 3,000 migrants were rescued trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, according to the United Nations migration agency, which also reported that more than a dozen rescue operations were under way in the area yesterday.

Citing the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Rome, IOM spokesperson Joel Millman told reporters today at the regular bi-weekly press briefing in Geneva that: "2,139 migrants had been rescued on 18 May alone through more than a dozen different operations in Mediterranean international waters. Additionally, IOM learned of about 500 people rescued in Libyan waters that day."

While exact casualty numbers were not known, IOM's Libya office has reported the remains of six migrants that were found over the past four days in various spots and communities on the Libyan coast.

Mr. Millman noted that it is quite possible that some of those had been from a previous shipwreck or perhaps all from new wreckage, which IOM is still trying to determine.

He also highlighted the numbers who had been crossing from Greece in the first four months of 2017.

"Almost 6,000 people have come through Greece in 2017 – 5,200 through the end of April – which was a low number compared to the numbers in 2016 and 2015. Of those 6,000, half came from Syria and Iraq. Following those two countries,

cones Congo, Algeria, Kuwait, or Cameroon, ahead of countries like Afghanistan or Iran, that have been countries of origin of many migrants in the past," Mr. Millman explained.

"Observing this," he continued "one could wonder about the degree to which Turkey continues to be an escape valve for the Iraq and Syria conflicts. It is surprising how many other country nationals seem to be accessing Turkey to make the voyage to Greece, including Haitians and Dominicans who have been seen coming to Greece through Turkey."

Cholera outbreak in war-torn Yemen spreading at 'unprecedented' speed, UN warns

19 May 2017 – As war-torn Yemen grapples with heavy rains, a collapsed healthcare system and crippled economy, a resurgent cholera outbreak has spread with "unprecedented" speed and taken medical professionals by surprise, the World Health Organization warned today.

According to WHO, more than 240 people have died from cholera in just the last three weeks, out of a total of 23,400 infections. The agency estimates that 7.6 million people live in areas at high risk of cholera transmission.

"I have to admit that when I see the data that I saw this morning, not officially released; are really taking us by surprise. The speed of the resurgence of the cholera epidemic is unprecedented" said Dr. Nevio Zagaria, the WHO representative in Yemen speaking to *UN News* in Geneva.

The current disease outbreak has its roots in an original episode last October. It peaked in December 2016 and never fully went away, amid conflict between Government and Houthi-backed opposition forces that has left over half the country's medical facilities closed or damaged, and the economy in freefall.

The lack of local health centres – and the fact that staff haven't been paid in seven months – have left Yemenis with no option but to seek help from hospitals, which WHO says are now "overwhelmed."

Additional problems include massive damage to the country's sewage and electricity infrastructure, which have left the water supply contaminated. A WHO map showing cholera hotspots in Yemen indicates the highest number of suspected cases – more than 6,000 – in the capital city, Sana'a.

Responding to the cholera outbreak in Yemen, WHO has so far distributed 32 tonnes of Intravenous fluids, over 300 cholera beds and 27 cholera kits. PHO: WHO Yemen

Few communities have been left untouched by the disease, which is characterized by severe diarrhoea that can kill within hours, if not treated promptly.

In some places the fatality rate is as high as four to five per cent, and WHO is extremely concerned that the disease is being passed from one person to another.

"But if the transmission goes on at this speed, we need to revise the figure and we need to expect something that can go up over 200, 250,000 cases over the next six months, in addition to the 50,000 cases that already occur […] so you can understand by yourself with this number the price we pay in terms of life is extremely high," explained Dr. Zagaria, adding: "We have to do more."

In response to the crisis, WHO has begun the task of setting up 350 cholera treatment centres and 2,000 oral rehydration points. It is also focusing on tracing infection hotspots, to reduce the risk of disease transmission.

The agency has stressed that the scale of the threat is "too big" for the Yemeni authorities to do on their own, and that to date only around 20 per cent of its $22 million cholera appeal has been met.

[In wake of 'WannaCry' attacks, UN cybersecurity expert discusses Internet safety](#)

19 May 2017 – A United Nations cybersecurity expert says that cybercrime is ultimately preventable, and that the internet – even the hidden so-called 'dark net' – has very good elements to it.

That may seem difficult to believe for people in the 150 countries hit by the 'WannaCry' ransomware, some of whom have had to pay hundreds of dollars in digital currency, Bitcoin, to get back photos of their families and other files on their laptops, or the families unable to board a train in Germany or see a doctor in the United Kingdom.

"Law enforcement and diplomats have been warning people of ransomware for some time, but this is really the first time that we've seen an attack of this size," said Neil Walsh, Chief of Cyber and Emerging Crime at the UN

Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)).

Last Friday's attack was due to a strain of Windows ransomware – which like the name suggests, encrypts files and holds them ransom. It entered individual systems as a compressed zip file through a security loophole in the Windows operating systems, and went on to scramble information in hundreds of thousands of machines belonging to hospitals, banks and other organizations around the world.

Mr. Walsh told *UN News* that the attack attributes its success to the fact that the operating systems used by those companies were old and did not have a security patch.

His advice boils down to clicking yes to software updates, using an up-to-date antivirus system, and backing up data into a device separate from the computer.

"If you weren't expecting an attachment from someone, or it looks strange, don't open it," Mr. Walsh added.

Neil Walsh, UNODC's Chief of Cyber and Emerging Crime, at a cybercrime training in East African. Photo: Credit UNODC

Headquartered in Vienna, and with teams in Guatemala, El Salvador, Tunisia and Thailand, Mr. Walsh's role is to help create an inter-governmental response to cybercrime. That involves, in part, public outreach about internet risk, including to children and their parents, and working with police, prosecutors and judges around the world to improve how cases are investigated and tried.

Despite the increased number of cybercrimes in the past several years, some governments do not understand cyber risk, he said.

"It still never fails to amaze me that some governments say we don't have cybercrime in our country, we don't see any threat here," Mr. Walsh noted. "And technically that means that they don't have the capability to identify, to look for and to respond to it. So my role, and the role of my people, is to help governments understand that and to help them put strategies in place to minimize that risk to them."

His teams also work with victims, to make sure that they have avenues to report crimes to the police, and sometimes seeking redress from a non-governmental organization or charity.

"There's no such thing as a victimless crime, and that's the same in cyberspace as in crime committed in the physical world," he added.

From 'I Love You' to Botnets

Cybercrime has evolved since the "Melissa" and "I Love You" computer worms in

1999 and 2000, becoming more common and more destructive.

"If we look back on some of the attacks we've seen over even in the past six months, one of the most common threats outside of ransomware that we've seen is called a botnet," Mr. Walsh said.

Bots are malware that sneak into a person's computer and quietly wait for commands. These zombie-like devices can then be used as part of a network, or botnet, for possible attacks.

Law enforcement experts from 22 countries and UNODC staff in a training course on cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin. Photo: Credit UNODC

"What that means is that cyber criminals have taken over lots of different devices that are connected to the internet. Now I don't mean traditional computers or smart phones, I mean everything from refrigerators to CCTV cameras to TVs. By compromising these devices, it's possible for a cybercriminal to cause real harm," the UN expert said.

That means more than getting a shopping password or stealing a credit card number – it could be shutting down the telephone system in a country or compromising a nuclear plant.

"If we consider this sort of weaponization of cyberspace and the impact that that could have, especially on developing countries, it could be enormous. If you had a significant cyberattack on a country that had no real capability to respond to a threat to its critical national infrastructure, you could have an immediate and long-standing impact."

Despite these threats, cybersecurity is still often viewed as the role of an IT department. There is not even an agreed-on definition of cybercrime around the world.

"It's one of those things that has become quite politically nuanced," Mr. Walsh said. "Our role here at UNODC is to help those political and diplomatic discussions, but also to help the investigations happen, irrespective of the definition behind it, because the crime still happens irrespective of what we're calling it."

In that context, UNODC has advocated for a free and open internet that would only be used for good, the UN expert said.

"Cybercrime is ultimately preventable," he said. "If you know what the risk is, you're less likely to become a victim."