

[Courageous Syrian swimmer named UN refugee agency Goodwill Ambassador](#)

27 April 2017 – The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) today appointed Yusra Mardini – a Syrian refugee who together with her sister swam for three hours in the Mediterranean Sea off Turkey’s coast, pulling a capsizing boat of refugees to safety – as its new Goodwill Ambassador.

Her actions saved the lives of 20 refugees who were fleeing the Syrian capital, Damascus.

[Yusra](#) was also one of the 10 athletes who made up the historic Olympic Refugee Team and participated at the Rio Olympic Games last year. She has been a very powerful voice for the forcibly displaced across the world and an example of their resilience and determination to rebuild lives and positively contribute to host communities.

“The UN refugee agency does the most important and incredible work for refugees under extremely challenging circumstances, and I am proud to use my voice to support UNHCR,” [said](#) Ms. Mardini, accepting her new role.

“I am thrilled to join the UNHCR family and eager to continue spreading the message that refugees are just normal people living through traumatic and devastating circumstances, who are capable of extraordinary things if only given a chance.”

Since her participation at the Rio Olympics, Ms. Mardini has worked closely with the UN agency, drawing global attention to the plight of refugees, speaking at forums including the 2016 UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants (which adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants) and the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos.

She has also advocated for the refugee cause during meetings with the Pope, world leaders, influential business figures and other world leaders.

“Yusra is a deeply inspiring young woman. Through her powerful personal story, she represents the hopes, the fears and the incredible potential of the more than ten million young refugees around the globe,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, welcoming Ms. Mardini’s appointment.

Also welcoming the announcement, International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach added: “It is my hope that through her role as UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, Yusra will continue to inspire refugees, reminding us that anyone can contribute to society through their talent, skills and strength of the human spirit.”

SEE RELATED: [‘Show strength’, inspire the world, UN chief tells Olympic Refugee Team](#)

Ms. Mardini is currently a full time student in Germany and continues to train in the hope of competing at the next Olympic Games in the Japanese capital, Tokyo, in 2020.

UNHCR [Goodwill Ambassadors](#) are some of the most recognizable public faces the UN agency. They help take its work to every corner of the world through their influence, dedication and hard work.

[Syria: 'Glimmers of humanity' overshadowed by brutality of increasing attacks on civilians, says UN aid chief](#)

27 April 2017 – With fighting intensifying on numerous fronts in Syria over the past months, the top United Nations humanitarian official today urged consolidation of the nationwide ceasefire, most importantly a pause in fighting on the outskirts of Damascus, to enable the delivery of aid.

“The Secretary-General has said time and again that there will be no military end to this conflict. Yet, military might continues to be used against civilians in a way that defies all reason, let alone morality or the law,” Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien told the Security Council.

He said that the use of “abhorrent chemical weapons” on 4 April in Khan Shaykhun was yet another horrific account of such brutality. “I wish I could say mindless brutality – but no, it was deliberate, planned, predetermined, by other humans against their own fellow human beings, sheer unbridled cruelty by leaders and commanders. And we await the investigation to confirm which ones.”

“The humanitarian situation is deteriorating, if that were possible, and the need for active engagement by members of the [Security] Council is urgently needed,” he said.

The core needs of the Syrian people from the international community remain largely unchanged, noting that they include the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all parties to the conflict; immediate, unimpeded and sustained access to all in need throughout Syria; an immediate lifting of all sieges; and a political solution to the conflict.

In besieged eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, civilians remain trapped amid reports of relentless shelling, airstrikes, and ground fighting, he said, noting that the last informal access routes have reportedly been closed

further restricting movement for the some 400,000 people who live in the area, and who the UN has been unable to access since October last year.



Stephen O'Brien (shown on screen), Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefs the Security Council via video teleconference on the situation in Syria. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

As the noose has tightened around eastern Ghouta, some 30,000 people in the adjacent areas of Barza and Qaboun have also come under siege by the Government of Syria, he added.

"As it is already too late for the more than a quarter million Syrians who have died already in this atrocious war, so members of the Security Council it is action today that counts," O'Brien stressed, via video link from Geneva, Switzerland.

He also urged the lifting of arbitrary and bureaucratic impediments by all parties throughout Syria.

"I will not repeat again the bureaucratic delaying tactics used by the Government of Syria to thwart humanitarian assistance at every turn, beyond saying that it continues to bring untold human suffering," Mr. O'Brien said.

Only four convoys have deployed so far under the new two-monthly April-May plan, reaching 157,500 people. None of these convoys reached besieged areas, due to a lack of necessary authorizations, he said.

Although the overall number of those besieged has been reduced to just over 620,000 people due to evacuations, this process is not in line with humanitarian principles, and not conducted in consultation with the people affected.

"Let us not pretend that those who evacuate move to a location of safety. Many of those who displace to Idlib or northern Aleppo continue to live in areas where civilian structures, including hospitals, come under regular aerial bombardment, and their access to basic goods such as food and shelter is limited," he said.

FEATURE: UN's mission to keep plastics out of oceans and marine life

27 April 2017 – There will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans by 2050 unless people stop using single-use plastic items such as plastic bags and plastic bottles, according to figures cited by the United Nations.

“Plastic pollution is surfing onto Indonesian beaches, settling onto the ocean floor at the North Pole, and rising through the food chain onto our dinner tables,” the agency known as UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) has said.

In 1950, the world’s population of 2.5 billion produced 1.5 million tons of plastic; in 2016, a global population of more than 7 billion people produced over 300 million tons of plastic – with severe consequences for marine plants and animals.

“According to one estimate, 99 per cent of all seabirds will have ingested plastic by mid-century,” Petter Malvik, UN Environment Programme’s Communications Officer, told *UN News*.

Earlier this year, the UN declared war on ocean plastic. Launched at the Economist World Ocean Summit in Bali, the #CleanSeas campaign urges governments to pass plastic reduction policies, targets industries to minimize plastic packaging and redesign products, and urges people to change their own habits.

VIDEO: United Nations Environment Programme warns for the consequences of polluting our ocean with plastic and says that over 8 million tons of plastic end up in oceans each year. The UN will convene the Ocean Conference in June to spur international action to safeguard oceans, seas and marine resources. Credit: *UN News*

Indonesia has committed to slashing its marine litter by 70 per cent by 2025; Uruguay will tax single-use plastic bags this year; and Kenya has agreed to eliminate them entirely.

Click on image for large. Graphic: UNEP

“The Clean Seas campaign has already achieved important wins for our oceans, but the job is far from done. By 2022, we aim to achieve a global ban on microbeads in personal care and cosmetic products and a drastic reduction in the production and use of single-use plastic,” said Mr. Malvik.

Microbeads are tiny pieces of plastic used in, among other things, some exfoliating products and toothpaste. They are listed in the ingredients as polyethylene or polypropylene.

Given the amount of plastic found today in oceans, much of marine life carries plastic that either entered them directly or by eating smaller marine creatures.

“These microplastics often carry toxic contaminants and pose a real risk to food security and human health if they enter the human food chain via the fish that we eat,” Petri Suuronen, Fishery Industry Officer at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), told UN News.

“With an estimated 9.7 billion people to be fed by 2050, the threat of fish stocks contaminated with microplastics and their associated toxins is clear,” Mr. Suuronen added.

In addition to dangers to humans, microplastics are a threat for fish and birds that mistake them as food and starve to death.

Microplastics are made one of two ways. Either they are manufactured – not only as microbeads, but even as microfibers that wash out of synthetic clothes during laundry – or they are created when waves and sunlight break down larger plastic pieces.

One of the biggest sources of this second type of microplastics is fishermen, who abandon, lose or discard fishing gear into seas and oceans.

A [2009 FAO report](#) estimated there are 640,000 tons of abandoned fishing nets on the ocean floor throughout the world. Much of it continuing to trap marine animals in a practice referred to as “ghost fishing.”



UNEP Patron for Oceans, Lewis Pugh, is swimming the Seven Seas to urge policy makers to protect at least 10 per cent of the world’s seas. In the Arabian Sea off Oman, the seabed was a rubbish dump. No fish. No coral. Just tyres, plastic packets, bottles, cans. Photo: UNEP

“Fishing gear can persist for decades in the oceans, entangling wildlife and polluting marine ecosystems as it breaks down into smaller and smaller particles,” said Mr. Suuronen.

Aside from its harmful effects, discarded plastic has economic drawbacks. Plastic packaging material with a value of at least [\\$80 billion](#) is lost each year, according to a report by the World Economic Forum and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, cited by the UN.

Click on image for large. Graphic: UNEP

The report also notes that if this trend continues, by 2050, oceans will contain more plastic than fish by weight.

Solving the issue of plastic pollution will require international agreements.

During the week of 5 June, Member States and civil society representatives will gather at UN Headquarters in New York for the Ocean Conference. Among its expected outcomes is a Call to Action – a global declaration that will set the course toward a more sustainable future for the world’s oceans and seas.

The focus of the conference is Sustainable Development Goal 14, which aims to alleviate poverty and inequality, while preserving the earth. ‘SDG 14’ calls for efforts to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine

resources.

“Humanity is only just waking up to the extent to which it is harming itself and the planetary environment through the plague-proportions of plastic it is dumping into the ocean,” said Peter Thomson, President of the UN General Assembly.

“The Ocean Conference must take the first steps to reverse the growing curse of marine plastic pollution. We have all played a part in this problem; we must all work on the solutions.”

[Afghanistan: UN urges protection of civilians as casualties remain high in first quarter](#)

27 April 2017 – The United Nations mission in Afghanistan today urged all parties to the conflict to take immediate and concrete measures to better protect civilians from harm, as the latest data for 2017 shows continued high numbers of civilian casualties.

“It is civilians, with increasing numbers of women and children, who far too often bear the brunt of the conflict,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in a press release. “With the so-called fighting season imminent, I appeal to all parties to take every measure possible to prevent unnecessary and unacceptable harm to Afghan civilians.”

In the first quarter of 2017, UNAMA documented 2,181 civilian casualties – 715 dead and 1,466 injured, a four per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2016. Civilian deaths decreased by two per cent while civilian injuries decreased by five per cent.

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Ground fighting remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, accounting for 35 per cent of all civilian casualties.

Anti-Government elements caused 62 per cent of civilian casualties, 447 dead and 906 injured for a combined 1,353, reflecting a five per cent increase compared to the same period in 2016.

UNAMA attributed 451, or 21 per cent of, civilian casualties – 165 dead

and 286 injured – to pro-Government forces, a decrease of two per cent compared to the same period in 2016.

The mission documented 148 civilian casualties – 72 dead and 76 injured – from aerial operations, a disturbing increase compared to 29 civilian casualties – eight dead and 21 injured – in the first quarter of 2016.

Improvised explosive devices (all non-suicide switch types) remained the second leading cause of civilian casualties, responsible for 409 civilian casualties – 126 dead and 283 injured, a decrease of one per cent compared to the same period in 2016 and comprising 19 per cent of all civilian casualties.

Suicide and complex attacks continued to cause record levels of civilian harm. The Mission recorded a five percent increase in civilian casualties from these tactics – 374 civilian casualties, 108 dead and 266 injured, accounting for 17 per cent of all civilian casualties.

Pressure-plate improvised explosive devices caused 218 civilian casualties, 86 dead and 132 injured, a 12 per cent increase.

Civilian casualties from unexploded ordnance increased by one per cent to 203, 50 dead and 153 injured, of which children comprised 81 per cent.

UNAMA is extremely concerned by increases in both child and women civilian casualties, particularly deaths. The Mission recorded a 24 per cent increase to 273 women civilian casualties, 88 dead and 185 injured.

Also in the first quarter, the mission recorded 735 child casualties, 210 dead and 525 injured, a three per cent increase compared to the same period in 2016.

[Syria: UN aid officials urge an end to airstrikes on hospitals](#)



Destroyed health centre in Sakhour, east Aleppo, Syria, which, four years ago, provided 20,000 Iraqi refugees with health care. Today, the UN is looking into its rehabilitation. Photo: OCHA/MB

26 April 2017 – Following reports of airstrikes that damaged hospitals in northern Syria, two senior United Nations humanitarian officials today called for an end to such attacks.

In a joint [statement](#), Kevin Kennedy, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for

the Syria Crisis, said that “it is completely unacceptable that facilities and people who are trying to save lives are being bombed.”

“The persistent and unceasing attacks on hospitals and medical facilities are one of the most egregious features of this war and have taken the lives of hundreds of medical personnel and deprived people in need of their most fundamental human right- the right to life. It must stop,” he added.

Ali Al-Za'tari, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, called for “the parties to the conflict to abide by their obligation under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals.”

The UN community is appalled by the ongoing damage and destruction of medical facilities in northern Syria depriving hundreds of thousands of people of basic health services, they said.

According to the statement, on 25 April at dawn, the Shahid Wasim Hussein hospital in Kafr Takharim city was reportedly hit by airstrikes, putting it out of service. On 22 April, airstrikes in the area of Abdin in Idleb Governorate reportedly hit an underground field hospital and reportedly killed four civilians.

Four other airstrikes impacting medical facilities were reported in April alone in this region, including a hospital specializing in maternal and child care. Almost all facilities were rendered out of service as a result.