

## Cuba needs new laws and stronger action targeting human trafficking – UN rights expert

21 April 2017 – A United Nations human rights expert has urged Cuba to consider introducing new legislation to ensure that everyone who falls victim to trafficking in persons can be identified and helped, and the authorities can take action against offenders.

“Although cases of trafficking in the country may appear to be limited, the number of criminal prosecutions and victims assisted is still too modest, and shows that a proactive approach to detection of the problem is needed,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, wrapping up a [five-day visit](#) to Cuba. Ms. Giammarinaro acknowledged the Government’s political will to address human trafficking and appreciated its strong aim on prevention, while underscoring that the protection of children from sexually motivated crimes should be extended to everyone under 18 years old. “The focus of Cuba’s anti-trafficking action so far has been sexual exploitation. However, recent developments which have created new opportunities for individual initiatives in the tourist sector require vigilance to stamp out any cases of labour exploitation; the use of foreign workers in the construction industry should also be monitored” she stressed. Based on a multi-disciplinary and coordinated approach to combat trafficking, Ms. Giammarinaro welcomed Cuba’s 2017-2020 Action Plan to prevent and fight against trafficking in persons and for protecting victims, which had been approved just before her visit – the first by a UN rights expert in 10 years. “The real challenge will be the implementation of measures provided for in the document, especially aimed at identifying and supporting victims, while respecting their human rights” the Special Rapporteur said. The UN expert praised Cuba’s universal and free systems for education, healthcare and social security, saying they helped to reduce the vulnerability of Cuban citizens to trafficking. However, citing thousands who, in 2015, were exposed to trafficking and exploitation, she said that migration in unsafe conditions created situations that could lead to trafficking. Ms. Giammarinaro spoke with a few of the survivors, who said that they had signed apparently legal contracts and been promised good working conditions abroad, “but, at their destination, their passports were confiscated, and they found themselves in the hands of gangs determined to exploit them for work without payment.” “When efforts were made to force them into prostitution/sex work, the women managed to communicate with their families in Cuba and were rescued thanks to the immediate action of Cuban embassies. However, we don’t know how many young women may have been obliged to stay in exploitative situations abroad,” the expert said. Ms. Giammarinaro called for the social stigma surrounding prostitution/sex work to be removed, and for the closure of so-called ‘rehabilitation centres’ where women are detained even though prostitution is not a crime. “Any fear of being punished is a major obstacle for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation to

report their plight and the abuse they have suffered,” she stressed. Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

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## [‘Large majority’ of millions living with hepatitis have no access to testing or treatment – UN agency](#)

21 April 2017 – New data published by the United Nations health agency has revealed that a vast majority of the estimated 325 million people living with chronic hepatitis B virus or hepatitis C virus infection lack access to life-saving testing and treatment, placing them at a great risk of chronic liver disease, cancer, and even death.

According to the UN World Health Organization ([WHO](#))’s 2017 Global Hepatitis Report, just 9 per cent of all hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections were diagnosed in 2015. An even smaller fraction – merely 8 per cent and 7 per cent– of those diagnosed with HBV and HCV, respectively, started curative treatment during that year.

“Viral hepatitis is now recognized as a major public health challenge that requires an urgent response,” said Margaret Chan, the Director-General of WHO, in a [news release](#) announcing the findings.

“Vaccines and medicines to tackle hepatitis exist, and [we] are committed to helping ensure these tools reach all those who need them.”

The report also revealed that increased coverage of HBV vaccinations among children have contributed substantially to preventing deaths from that virus.

Globally, 84 per cent of children born in 2015 received the three recommended doses of HBV vaccine.

However, an estimated 257 million people, mostly adults born before the introduction of the HBV vaccine, were living with chronic HBV infection in 2015. There is also currently no vaccine against HCV, and access to treatment for both HBV and HCV is low.

HBV infection requires lifelong treatment, and Hepatitis C can be cured within a relatively short time using the correct medicines, making the need for testing and treatment all the more important.

“We are still at an early stage of the viral hepatitis response, but the way

forward looks promising,” said Gottfried Hirnschall, Director of WHO’s Department of HIV and the Global Hepatitis Programme, adding: “More countries are making hepatitis services available for people in need – a diagnostic test costs less than \$1 and the cure for HCV can be below \$200.”

#### *Western Pacific, African regions bear greatest burdens*

Findings have also revealed that Hepatitis B levels vary across the planet. WHO’s Western Pacific Region (115 million people) and its African Region (60 million people) have the highest number of such patients. These roughly equate to 6.2 per cent and 6.1 per cent of their respective total populations.

Similarly, HCV prevalence by regions varies from about seven million (in WHO Americas Region) to 15 million (in the UN agency’s Eastern Mediterranean Region).

The report has also shown that that despite challenges, some countries have made strides in scaling-up hepatitis services.

China, for instance, achieved a high coverage of nearly 96 per cent for the timely birth dose of HBV vaccines, and reached the Hepatitis B control goal of less than one per cent prevalence in children under the age of five in 2015.

Mongolia, too, has improved the uptake of hepatitis treatment by including HBV and HCV medicines in its National Health Insurance Scheme, which covers 98 per cent of its population.

Similarly, generic competition among medicines has also contributed substantially, in Egypt, for example, the price of a 3-month cure for Hepatitis C has reduced to less than \$200 (in 2016) from \$900 (in 2015) also, in Pakistan, the same course currently costs as little as \$100.

WHO’s [Global Health Sector Strategy](#) on viral hepatitis aims to test 90 per cent and treat 80 per cent of people with HBV and HCV by 2030.

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## **Spread of literacy among women highlighted in UNESCO anniversary global review**

21 April 2017 – The increase in reading and writing proficiency among women is a result of the significant up tic in their enrolment and completion of primary education over the last five decades, even as overall funding for adult literacy has remained low, a recently-launched study by the United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) has found.

The publication, *Reading the past, writing the future: Fifty years of promoting literacy*, marks the “uplifting and sobering” [fiftieth anniversary](#) of UNESCO’s efforts to mark global progress on literacy, celebrated annually on 8 September as International Literacy Day. The authors of the current report examine the nature and evolution of the educational challenge, and take stock of literacy initiatives worldwide.

The spread of literacy among women has been a key feature of the past fifty years. However, the gap between male and female literacy rates only started narrowing from 1990 onwards. UNESCO projects that it is likely to keep unfolding over the period of 2015–30 and beyond.

While various positive trends are highlighted, Qian Tang, UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education, in the [publication’s foreword](#), calls for “renewed and strengthened commitment to support literacy promotion for all, including the 758 million youth and adults currently excluded from the networks of written communication.”

The authors note that around 1950, just over half of all the world’s people were reported as being literate. Since then, they state, the adult literacy rate has increased by five percentage points every decade on average, to 86 per cent in 2015.

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with various contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society. UNESCO 2005a:21

One of the report’s main findings is that there are now more illiterate adults compared with 50 years ago, meaning that literacy efforts have not kept pace with population growth, a trend UNESCO’s Mr. Tang finds ‘troubling.’

### **Resources to educate adults**

The UN’s educational arm identifies sufficient resources for education as one of the bottlenecks for the [2030 Agenda](#) and its Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), specifically [Goal 4](#), on ensuring ‘inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning’ particularly for the large and growing group of illiterate adults. The authors find that funding for adult education and literacy has rarely been adequate.

UNESCO claims that lack of funding is one of the reasons why progress continues to be slow in certain regions and countries. Among the surveyed countries, only four devote three per cent or more of their educational budget to adult education.

Total aid to education by the members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is about 1.4 per cent of their total aid budget, according to UNESCO's report, with only a few OECD-members devoting more than three per cent of their individual funding to education.



Numbers of illiterate adults (aged 15 and above) and illiterate young people (aged 15–24) (million), by region, 1950 and 2015. Graphic: UNESCO

### ***Regional disparities***

Progress has been far from uniform across countries and regions. UNESCO defines the spread of literacy among young people – especially young women – as a decisive trend for Western Asia and Northern Africa regions, with regional youth literacy rates reaching almost 95 per cent in 2015.

UNESCO argues that the spread of literacy has contributed to the demand for political freedom and socio-economic development expressed by young people in these regions. It also points out that their reading and writing proficiency will be crucial for democratization and stabilization in both regions.

Eastern Asia and South-East Asia have almost universalized literacy thanks to steady progress since the 1960s. Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have also reached high adult literacy and almost universal youth literacy in recent decades.

For decades large-scale adult illiteracy will persist in Southern Asia, UNESCO projects. The number of illiterate adults has merely stabilized, but the region still counts 43.9 million illiterate young people. Progress made in the last 25 years has been hampered by extreme poverty and conflict.

Other regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania face specific difficulties. UNESCO warns that both regions cannot be expected to reach universal youth literacy rates by 2030 if current trends continue. It claims that sub-Saharan Africa – accounting for almost half of the world's illiterate people – is the only region in which the number of illiterate young people kept increasing.

The report is based on data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) and information from UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL). The publication analyses trends and impacts of literacy programmes on 50 countries around the world.

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**[UN refugee agency sending urgent](#)**

## [relief items for Congolese civilians fleeing to Angola](#)

21 April 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency is shipping tents, mosquito nets and other essential relief items to Angola, where some 9,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have fled this month alone.

Refugees reported fleeing [attacks from militia groups](#), who are targeting police, military officials, and civilians who they believe are supporting or representing the Government, Babar Baloch, spokesperson at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), told reporters at the UN's Geneva Office.

The refugees are fleeing from the Kasai region, a formerly peaceful area that turned violent in mid-2016, forcing more than one million civilians to run away.

The new arrivals are terrified and still fear for their lives and mentioned they do not have any immediate plans to return home, Mr. Baloch said. Some parents have reportedly sent their children across the border, worrying they would be forcibly recruited by the militias if they had stayed in the DRC.

The UN agency expressed particular concern about the situation of children, many of whom are arriving malnourished and sick & suffering from diarrhoea, fever and malaria.

Those fleeing into Angola continue to arrive mainly in Dundo, the capital of north-eastern Luanda Norte Province.

UNHCR is sending an additional emergency team to the town tomorrow, to support relief efforts.

There are concerns that the situation will worsen as Angola's wet season peaks in April, further complicating living conditions and the health of refugees, particularly women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

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## [UNICEF calls for action to prevent more deaths in Central Mediterranean as attempted crossings spike](#)

21 April 2017 – Noting increases in number of migrants, including children,

attempting to reach European shores using the Central Mediterranean route, and consequent rise in number of deaths, the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has called for safe and legal pathways for those who are fleeing conflict, poverty and deprivation.

[According](#) to UNICEF estimates, at least 849 people, including more than 150 children, perished at sea while trying to make the perilous crossing since January this year.

It is deeply concerning that vulnerable people, including thousands of children, are risking their lives to reach Europe's shores using this incredibly dangerous route," Afshan Khan, the UNICEF Regional Director and Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe, said in a [news release](#) today.

Since the start of the year, nearly 37,000 [refugees and migrants](#) 13 per cent of them children have reached Italy by sea via the Central Mediterranean. This is an increase of 42 per cent compared to the same time period last year.

In particular, unaccompanied and separated children are at most risk, and these numbers too have seen a dramatic increase. In January and February this year, some 1,865 unaccompanied and separated children arrived in Italy, an increase of 40 per cent compared to the same period last year.

This is further evidence that when safe and legal pathways to migration are cut off, desperate children and families will do whatever they can to flee conflict, poverty and deprivation

UNICEF also noted that recent good weather and calmer waters in the Mediterranean have been accompanied by a surge in refugees and migrants attempting to cross. During the Easter weekend (last weekend) alone, more than 8,300 were rescued from the sea between Libya and Italy. At least eight migrants were reported to have drowned over the weekend.

This is further evidence that when safe and legal pathways to migration are cut off, desperate children and families will do whatever they can to flee conflict, poverty and deprivation," noted Ms. Khan.

As part of its global policy for children on the move, the UN agency has been calling for more action to protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children; end the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating; and to promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination.

It has also underlined the need to keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status; to ensure that all refugee and migrant children have opportunities to learn, access to health care and other quality services; and to address the underlying causes of large scale movements of refugees and migrants.