

Recent attack on evacuated civilians in Syria 'likely a war crime,' says UN rights office

18 April 2017 – The United Nations human rights office today expressed great concern about the safety of civilians being evacuated in Syria, saying a weekend attack on a convoy near Aleppo likely amounts to a war crime and the situation in Syria should be referred to the International Criminal Court.

“ [We add our voice](#) to the condemnation of the attack near Rashideen near western rural Aleppo Governorate that hit a convoy carrying people from the besieged Syrian towns of Fuha and Kefraya to Government-controlled areas, killing dozens of people,” Rupert Colville, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), told journalists in Geneva.

“It is an attack which likely amounts to a war crime,” he stressed.

OHCHR is calling on all parties to ensure the safety and protection of people being evacuated.

“We reiterate the High Commissioner’s call for accountability and the need to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court,” Mr. Colville said.

He noted that while OHCHR cannot confirm how the attack was carried out or those responsible, footage seen by the Office “showed children gathering around a person giving out sweets just prior to the explosion.”

Hospitals in Aleppo city received the bodies of 96 civilians, including 67 children, Mr. Colville confirmed, adding that the number of children reportedly killed is “particularly abhorrent.”

In addition to the people killed, OHCHR has confirmed that some of the injured civilians remain missing.

“Some are believed to have been taken by armed opposition groups to opposition-controlled hospitals in Idleb Governorate,” he said. “Due to their perceived sympathies for the Government of Syria, their families are concerned for their safety.”

There are also reports of at least 120 civilians in the Aleppo University Hospital.

The groups are among those being evacuated from Fuha and Kerfraya as part of the “Four Towns Agreement” negotiated by Qatar and Iran. The two other towns are Madaya and Zabadani.

“These people had been living under incessant shelling for more than two

years, with little food or medical supplies, and under the constant fear of attack by armed groups," Mr. Colville said.

Today's condemnation echoes senior UN officials, including the Organization's top humanitarian official and the head of the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), who have expressed "horror" at the attack on civilians evacuated from the besieged towns.

[Grotesque rape chants expose 'campaign of terror' in Burundi – UN rights chief](#)

18 April 2017 – Raising alarm over an apparent widespread pattern of rallies in many places across Burundi where young men from the Imbonerakure militia – the youth wing of the ruling political party – repeatedly chant a call to impregnate or kill opponents, the top United Nations human rights official has called on the authorities to promptly act to stop such incitement to violence.

In a [news release](#) issued today by his office ([OHCHR](#)), UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said that it was particularly worrying that instead of a putting a stop to such events, senior Government officials continue to take part in such rallies.

"The grotesque rape chants by the young men [...] are deeply alarming – particularly because they confirm what we have been hearing from those who have fled Burundi about a campaign of fear and terror by this organized militia," said High Commissioner Zeid.

The news release mentions a chilling video, circulating on social media of a rally in the Ntega commune, Kirundo province (northeast Burundi), in which more than 100 Imbonerakure members are seen repeating dozens of times their call to "make opponents pregnant so that they can give birth to Imbonerakure".

In the same video, another group then repeats a chant – audible some 19 times – "he or she should die".

The UN human rights wing noted that the ruling CNDD-FDD party, on 5 April, issued a statement condemning the chanting. OHCHR, however, added that recent reports indicate that similar, larger rallies have been organized across the country by officials from the Government and the President's party.

"[The] condemnation is meaningless if, instead of a putting a stop to such events, senior Government officials continue to take part in such

rallies,” stressed Mr. Zeid, adding: “The Government needs to stop pretending that the Imbonerakure are nothing but a community development group. Such blatant and brazen hate speech and incitement to violence must not be tolerated, nor encouraged.”

Condemnation is meaningless if, instead of a putting a stop to such events, senior Government officials continue to take part in such rallies

In the news release, the UN rights chief also voiced concern over continuing reports of serious human rights violations in the African country, including “systematic use” of torture by security forces, increasing cases of enforced disappearance, nightly raids by the Imbonerakure militia into homes of people who refuse to join the ruling party, and people targeted due to their ethnicity.

According to UN estimates, more than 400,000 people have fled the African nation over the last two years fearing for their safety.

“Those responsible for human rights violations, regardless of their position or rank, must be held accountable,” said Mr. Zeid, underlining that the authorities in Burundi must send clear, unequivocal instructions to the police, security, intelligence and military officers to operate in line with international human rights law.

“Impunity for human rights violations by security forces and the Imbonerakure must be brought to an end.”

The High Commissioner also asked the Government to grant OHCHR unfettered access, to be able to monitor the human rights situation throughout the country, to be able to independently verify allegations of grave violations and to support the authorities in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Somalia: UN, global partners commend creation of National Security Council

17 April 2017 – The United Nations and other members of the international community today commended Somalia’s Federal Government and the Federal Member States for agreeing to form a National Security Council, as well as decisions taken on priorities such as fighting corruption and drought response.

These decisions follow two days of consultations held in the capital, Mogadishu, led by Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo and other senior officials.

“This agreement marks a [major milestone](#) for Somalia. It is a cornerstone of the federal state building process and is a basis upon which strengthened security can be built,” said Michael Keating, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Somalia, referring to the creation of a National Security Council.

President Farmajo will head the National Security Council, whose members will include regional leaders.

Mr. Keating, who is also the head of the UN political mission in Somalia ([UNSOM](#)), said that the international community is committed to supporting the Government’s priorities.

He made the statement on behalf of the UN, noting that the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the European Union (EU), Italy, Ethiopia, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States all express their support for the outcome of the consultations.

The political leaders also agreed to aid drought-stricken Somalia avert a potential famine. About half of the Somali population is in need of assistance, including 330,000 children.

Also today, the UN reported that an explosion occurred near Mogadishu, potentially targeting a convoy from the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)). At the time of the incident, the convoy was returning from an area outside of Mogadishu to provide life-saving emergency food to people impacted by the drought.

A UN spokesperson told journalists in New York that the occupants of the vehicles – including WFP staff and a visiting journalist – were “all safe, although two private security guards escorting the team were wounded.”

[Haiti: UN inaugurates water supply system in Lascahobas as part of anti-cholera fight](#)

17 April 2017 – Historically, the people in the Madan Mak and Loncy areas of the Lascahobas Commune have always had serious problems with access to safe drinking water.

Situated in a mountainous region of Haiti’s Central Plateau, a few hundred kilometres from the capital Port-au-Prince, the two communities – up to just a few weeks ago – were among the 42 per cent of the country’s population still without access to safe drinking water in 2017.

When the cholera epidemic hit the Plateau Central, the need for safe potable water became crucial to eliminate the transmission of the disease.

“Before the water came here, we had to do a lot of work to find drinking water. We were forever obliged to go fetch water from Mont-Désir, which is miles away,” says Maria-Rose Joseph, a resident of Loncy. When she could not travel the distance, Ms. Joseph was obliged to use a source of unsafe water – despite the risks of transmission of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid, and cholera.

The top United Nations humanitarian official in Haiti stressed that all efforts to ensure the provision of safe water and sanitation are crucial to eliminate cholera.

“Elimination of cholera can be achieved in the medium term – two or three years – if emphasis is placed on immediate action. That is to say an emphasis put on response capacity, management and immediate treatment of water. But nothing can be done without an investment in water, sanitation and hygiene,” explains El-Mostafa Benlamlh, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Haiti.

Elimination of cholera can be achieved in the medium term – two or three years – if emphasis is placed on immediate action
El-Mostafa Benlamlh, Deputy Special Representative for Haiti

To address the concerns of those living in Mangoule, the Department of Artibonite proposed a new project to the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti ([MINUSTAH](#)). “It was an essential project for the area because the residents had no drinking water. Other areas also have the same problem but, for now, we do not have the resources to carry out these other essential projects,” said Fritson Jean-Baptiste, adviser to the Department of Artibonite.

“The entire Petit-Fond area benefits from safe water provision. Certainly, without the help of MINUSTAH the project would never have happened and that is why we want to thank all those involved,” he added.

The project involved the capture of water from the Mangoule spring, following which a sedimentation basin of 8 cubic metres was built. Then a 60-cubic-metre tank to store the water to supply the eight kiosks and three water points were constructed. The total cost of the project was \$94,280 – of which \$89,195 was financed by MINUSTAH.

VIDEO: El-Mostafa Benlamlh, Deputy Special Representative for Haiti, discusses progress on safe water and sanitation in Haiti’s Central Plateau – a move critical for eliminating cholera in the country.

Recently inaugurated in the presence of the local authorities and the MINUSTAH leadership, the project now makes it possible to meet the needs of more than 14,000 people by making access to drinking water easier.

“Our water needs are crystal clear and with the implementation of every successful new project, one can really see the change and improvement in the people’s living conditions,” says Lehon Johasse, Coordinator for Actions en Santé et en Développement d’Haïti, one of the local implementing agencies for this type of project.

For Mr. Benlamlih, investment in the water, sanitation and hygiene sectors must continue, and donor support is vital for this effort. “Haiti needs its partners and donors. It’s a collective effort – and the United Nations is there to help, coordinate, act and work with NGOs, work with national authorities and national institutions. We need donor support. That support is absolutely necessary.

“We must not relax our efforts,” he added. “There is no guarantee that cholera will not resume and surpass our capabilities. So we must not let go – and it is here that friends, partners and donors must continue to support and invest in this effort.”

Part of this particular initiative – the project to capture the Mangoule source – aims to help the Haitian authorities to improve public infrastructure and the living conditions of its population. As part of its new approach to tackle cholera, the UN wants to step up its support to the Haitian Government in the construction of drinking water, sanitation and health care systems, while developing a support package to provide material assistance to Haitians most directly affected by the disease.

Since 2010, the cholera epidemic has directly affected 805,000 people and taken the lives of more than 9,480 [official figures as of 11 March 2017]. The UN-backed national and international efforts led to a 90 per cent reduction in the number of suspected cases of cholera compared with the peak of the epidemic in 2011.

Under its new approach launched last year, the UN is intensifying support to the Haitian Government in building sound water, sanitation and health systems.

“I am so glad I can have water now. We need the water and before we had to set off at 4 a.m. to secure drinking water. I am so satisfied with this successful project that it is necessary to say it loud and clear. We had no water to wash, no water to drink – and the cholera came to take away our lives. Now we have water and we are delivered,” said Sonia Verville, a beneficiary of the project in Madan Mak.

[New UN guidelines to make](#)

international trade in plants and seeds safer

17 April 2017 – A United Nations commission overseeing plant health has adopted a new global standard to ensure that international trade in plants and seeds – vital to feed the world’s population – is free from agricultural pests and disease-causing bugs.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the threat of transmission of pests – unwanted stowaways – on ships and containers transporting agricultural cargo, especially seeds, is a growing concern around the world.

“Unlike other agricultural products that are destined for consumption, such as wheat, barley or lentils, seeds are a cause for greater concern,” said the UN agency in a news release.

“[As they are] destined for planting, there is a greater risk that any pests they carry could establish themselves and spread after planting,” it added.

For instance, once ashore, pests such as the gypsy moths, giant African snails or Argentine ants can invade new environments, devastate crops and cause much hardship.

Adopted last Thursday by the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures, the governing body of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), the [new standard](#) will help harmonize the ways countries deal with the complexities of the international seed trade.

The efforts are also expected to facilitate trade in seeds – valued at about \$12 billion annually – while ensuring that such shipments safeguard food supplies for a growing global population.

In the news release, FAO further underscored that such steps are important to protect global food security as well as for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to combatting hunger.

“Because the IPPC is the only organization to set government-recognized plant health standards that facilitate international trade, the decisions made here will be essential to further protecting the world’s plant resources, the very foundation of life,” said Kundhavi Kadiresan, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific.

“FAO’s vision of a world without hunger can only be accomplished with healthy plants that are free from regulated pests,” she underscored.

The twelfth session of the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures, which concluded last week in Incheon, Republic of Korea, also discussed guidelines

for an import regulatory system, and a series of treatments that stop pests from burrowing into wooden packaging materials and methods to stop fruit flies from attacking citrus fruits.