

First-ever World Braille Day underscores importance of written language for human rights

To raise awareness of the importance of Braille for approximately 1.3 billion people living with some form of distance or near vision impairment, on Friday the United Nations is observing the first official [World Braille Day](#).

Recognized henceforth each 4 January, the Day was proclaimed by the General Assembly last November, as a means of realizing fully the human rights of visually-impaired and partially-sighted people, and bringing written language to the forefront as a critical prerequisite for promoting fundamental freedoms.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) reports that people who are visually impaired are more likely than those with full sight to experience higher rates of poverty and disadvantages which can amount to a lifetime of inequality.

Around the world, 39 million people are blind, and another 253 million have some sort of vision impairment. For them, Braille provides a tactical representation of alphabetic and numerical symbols so blind and partially-sighted people are able to read the same books and periodicals printed as are available in standard text form.

Six dots represent each letter, number, even musical and mathematical symbols, to allow the communication of important written information to ensure competency, independence and equality.

[The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CPRD) cites Braille as a means of communication; and regards it as essential in education, freedom of expression and opinion, access to information and social inclusion for those who use it.

To foster more accessible and disability-inclusive societies, the UN launched its first-ever [flagship report](#) on disability and development last year, coinciding with the International Day for Persons with Disabilities on which Secretary General António Guterres urged the international community to take part in filling inclusion gaps.

“Let us reaffirm our commitment to work together for an inclusive and equitable world, where the rights of people with disabilities are fully realized,” he said.

[Security Council condemns attacks on Afghan security forces which killed at least 27](#)

The United Nations Security Council has condemned “in the strongest terms” a series of coordinated attacks aimed at security checkpoints in northern Afghanistan which took place on Monday night, killing at least 27 and wounding dozens of others

According to news reports, the assaults were carried out by Taliban extremists in the provinces of Sar-e-Pul and Balkh, striking security forces in three areas; the centre of Sayad District, along a road linking Sar-e-Pul to Jowzjan, and a village where oil wells are situated.

“The members of the Security Council expressed their deepest sympathy and condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government of Afghanistan and they wished a speedy and full recovery to those who were injured”, said a statement issued on Thursday.

Council members “reaffirmed that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security”, and underlined the need “to hold perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice.”

They called on all States “to cooperate actively with the Government of Afghanistan and all other relevant authorities” to help end the cycle of violence in the country.

New presidential election date

The attacks on New Year’s Eve came a day after the announcement by Afghan electoral authorities of a new date for planned presidential elections, which had been scheduled to take place on April 20. Elections will now be held in July this year.

In [a statement](#), the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, [UNAMA](#), said that “the United Nations understands that the new date announced by the Independent Election Commission follows consultations with a broad range of political actors, civil society organizations, and the Government of Afghanistan, all of whom have expressed the strong desire for a credible and transparent presidential election.”

“The United Nations acknowledges the IEC’s assessment that additional time is needed in order to learn from the 2018 parliamentary elections and adequately prepare”, said UNAMA.

'Milestones are clear' for 'significant progress' in Somalia during 2019, Security Council hears

Somali Government efforts to build a lasting peace through political reform and transformation have progressed along a "positive trajectory" but everyone involved in the process needs to "pull in the same direction", the UN Special Representative in the country told the Security Council on Thursday.

Nicholas Haysom commended the Office of the Prime Minister "for leading Government efforts to tackle corruption", and praised improvements in public financial management which had led to a recorded surplus of \$8 million last September.

But turning to Somalia's complex "Roadmap on Inclusive Politics" reform process, he said that a "key milestone" had been missed in not meeting the December deadline for a draft new Electoral Law. Despite that, the National Independent Electoral Commission has made progress with voter registration planning, and 35 political parties have been officially registered.

"Women's meaningful participation" in the Constitutional Review process, and other draft national agreements on justice, mineral resource-sharing, "allocation of powers and fiscal federalism" was essential, said the top UN official from South Africa, who also heads the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia, UNSOM.

Overshadowing progress there however, he said, was a continuing stalemate between the leaders of central Government, and Somalia's Member States, which "continues to impede progress in defining the federal model, building institutions of state, and in the implementation of the National Security Architecture".

There had been encouraging steps taken to "restore relations" by the President and Prime Minister, and a committee established to work with the Upper House of parliamentary representatives, Mr. Haysom told Council members.

Risk that 'complexity shifts to conflict'

The Special Representative noted that "politics is complex in any nation, but in one that is still establishing its norms, institutional parameters" and debating how they will work for the common good "there is a risk that complexity shifts to conflict".

This had proved the case in the election process for South West State, where

allegations of interference by the Federal Government and violence which erupted following the arrest of a candidate who was a former al-Shabaab deputy-leader, “marred the process and does not bode well for upcoming” elections, said Mr. Haysom.

He said it was regrettable that 15 people, including a regional assembly member had lost their lives, adding that the detention of the former extremist group leader, could deter others from abandoning terrorist violence, for the ballot box.

Al-Shabaab still the ‘biggest source of insecurity’

Al-Shabaab continues to be “the biggest source of insecurity in Somalia” said Mr. Haysom, welcoming the Government’s condemnation of the group’s attack on New Year’s Day against the UN’s headquarters in the Somali capital, which injured three staff members.

Thanks to the African Union’s AMISOM troops, and Government forces, conventional attacks have been largely stymied he said, with Al-Shabaab now relying on assassinations and improvised explosives, but “indiscriminate attacks” were still a constant threat.

He added that the UN had “continued to support conflict prevention and conflict resolution efforts in several parts of the country in collaboration with our partners”, said the top official.

Humanitarian needs remain high, with 4.2 million requiring assistance and protection, almost two-thirds of them children. “Around 1.5 million are severely food insecure at crisis or emergency levels. Around 2.6 million people are internally-displaced” he said.

Finally, he added, respect of human rights in the country and international humanitarian law, and the protection of civilians caught up in violence, “remains key for Somalia’s transition and sustainable peace”.

For more on this story including remarks made by the head of AMISOM, and the Somali Ambassador to the UN, go to our [UN Meetings Coverage here](#).

[Uganda’s Ebola preparedness ‘will go a long way’ says WHO chief](#)

In the wake of an ongoing Ebola outbreak affecting the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), neighboring Uganda is implementing a series of preventative response measures to keep the deadly disease at bay.

With the total number of recorded patients in and around the North Kivu region standing at 608 of whom 368 have died, DRC is struggling to keep up with its second-deadliest outbreak ever, as healthcare efforts have been disrupted by armed groups, as well as political protests, and the displacement of those potentially-infected.

Director General of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on Thursday [applauded](#) the response the country has mounted so far, commending Uganda's history of effective disease prevention, highlighting that the country's strategies have been "recognized globally."

Rapid alert, immediate response, and effective field coordination were key features that controlled the largest outbreak ever recorded in Uganda in 2000 and 2001, when 574 people were infected and 261 died.



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In response to a growing number of infections in DRC, the Ugandan government has prioritized vaccination of frontline health workers, screening travelers at points of entry, and engaging in risk communication.

These preventative measures said Mr. Ghebreyesus, speaking alongside the Ugandan Prime Minister in the capital Kampala, "will go a long way" towards saving the lives of health workers; adding that WHO is "really grateful for the government's commitment and support."

Containing the spread also means collecting and testing of blood samples from suspected cases, capacity building for case management, psycho-social care and capacity building for safe and dignified burials.

The need to amplify primary healthcare in order to prevent diseases, is vital for Uganda, Mr. Ghebryesus stressed, and prevention of communicable and non-communicable disease are key to achieving Universal Health Coverage.

In getting to the root of stopping the spread of Ebola across the border, WHO has [said](#) that these encounters with deadly pathogens can also heavily undermine weak health systems, and allow viruses to spiral out of control.

Ugandan Prime Minister, Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda expressed appreciation for WHO's support, saying that "whatever Uganda has managed to achieve in public health is because of the general leadership of WHO."

Achieving healthcare for all “is key to tackling many of the afflictions we are getting,” Mr. Rugunda highlighted. “We have no choice but to support public healthcare.”

[Deadly Mali attack to be investigated by UN rights experts](#)

An attack on a village in central Mali earlier this week in which at least 37 civilians died, is to be investigated with the help of United Nations human rights experts, the UN stabilization mission in the country ([MINUSMA](#)), announced on Thursday.

Women and children were among those killed in Koulogon Peul on Tuesday, according to MINUSMA. It has called for justice for the victims, whose deaths come amid escalating intercommunal clashes, fuelled in part by decades-old disputes over land and cattle by pastoralists across the whole Sahel region and by extremist armed groups.

“I strongly condemn these attacks against civilians in the village of Koulogon Peul and call for the perpetrators to be held accountable,” said Joanne Adamson, MINUSMA Deputy Special Representative.

“It is becoming more and more important to bring an end to violence in the regions of Mopti and Segou. We need to intensify our efforts to find judicial and political solutions,” she insisted.

According to MINUSMA, the latest incident saw unidentified armed assailants attack Koulogon Peul village in Mali’s central Mopti region, at around 5am on New Year’s Day. In addition to those killed and wounded in their homes, houses and granaries were also destroyed on purpose, it said in a statement.

The assailants wore traditional hunting outfits associated with the Dozos people, MINUSMA also reported.

After welcoming the rapid deployment of Malian troops to the site of the attack and the decision to open a police inquiry, the Mission’s communiqué added that “in the coming days”, it will deploy a human rights team to support the probe.

“This work will make it possible to carry out an investigation in the zone where the attack took place”, the MINUSMA statement continued, noting that it would also help to complete evidence-gathering, establish the reasons for the killings and apportion responsibility.

The attack is the latest episode of violence involving self-defence militias

and armed groups in Mali, where extremists took over the north of the country in 2012.

Although the French military succeeded in forcing them back, the jihadists have maintained support in communities in the north and centre, causing a significant deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the last 12 months.

Overall, some 7.2 million people living in Mali's 50 administrative districts, or "cercles", have been affected by insecurity, drought and flooding.

Among them, 3.2 million require humanitarian assistance, according to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), and four regions have acute malnutrition levels above the 10 per cent alert threshold: Gao, Menaka, Segou and Timbuktu.

For the situation in Mali to improve, the effective implementation of the peace agreement in the north needs to happen, OCHA said in its [2019 Global Humanitarian Overview](#), along with the restoration of law and basic services throughout the country, and the protection of civilians by national and international forces.