

Australia urged to evacuate offshore detainees amid widespread, acute mental distress

Australia should end its offshore processing policy on the Pacific islands of Nauru and Papua New Guinea amid reports of widespread, acute mental distress and attempted suicide by children and young adults, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Friday.

“In one of the various cases brought to our attention during September, a suicidal pre-teenage girl remains in Nauru despite doctors’ advice to the contrary,” UNHCR spokesperson Catherine Stubblefield told journalists in Geneva. “Medical records seen by UNHCR staff show she first doused herself in petrol, before attempting to set herself alight and pulling chunks of hair from her head.”

According to UNHCR, more than 1,400 people are still being held on both islands, which have hosted Australia-bound migrants and asylum-seekers forcibly transferred there, since 2013.

There’s no longer time for the Government of Australia to delay or find other solutions, and it’s for that reason that we’re asking people be evacuated today – *Catherine Stubblefield, UNHCR*

The UN agency’s appeal to the Australian authorities echoes a warning from non-governmental organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) which pulled out of Nauru last week, at the request of the island’s authorities.

In the last 11 months on Nauru, according to MSF, at least 78 people attempted suicide, had suicidal thoughts or self-harmed.

Amid a “collapsing health situation”, UNHCR explained that around 500 people have been returned to Australia on medical grounds, but this is “significantly lower” than all those with acute needs.

There have been no returns from Papua New Guinea to Australia this year, the UN agency noted, despite “several instances” of self-harm or attempted suicide there in the past month.

In addition, a number of people with acute physical and mental needs remain untreated, UNHCR said.

“This policy has failed on a number of measures,” Mrs Stubblefield said. “It’s failed to protect refugees, it’s failed to provide even for their most basic needs throughout a period that now exceeds five years. And it’s failed to provide solutions for a substantial number that is still waiting and can

clearly no longer afford to wait.”

The UNHCR spokesperson reported that of the 12 people who have died since Australia began detaining migrants and refugees offshore, half had been confirmed or suspected suicides. The mental health of those being held on the islands was worsening, she added.

“Our own consultant medical experts in 2016 found a cumulative prevalence of anxiety, depression and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in both Papua New Guinea and Nauru, to be well above 80 per cent, and the situation has deteriorated since then,” Mrs Stubberfield said. “So, there are very serious needs that are not being met. There’s no longer time for the Government of Australia to delay or find other solutions, and it’s for that reason that we’re asking people be evacuated today.”

‘Responsibility lies with Australia’

Highlighting the case of a young Iranian man who took his life in June after spending “most of his adult life” in offshore processing, the UNHCR spokesperson underscored Australia’s obligations to those under its care.

“Ultimately, responsibility lies with Australia for those who have sought its protection,” Mrs Stubberfield said. “As we mentioned, this is a system designed, financed, managed by Australia, and it’s Australia which must be accountable for the full gamut of those consequences.”

Among UNHCR’s concerns is the lack of basic services available to vulnerable migrants and asylum-seekers.

Only “limited” healthcare is provided on both islands by sub-contractors on hire from the Australian Government, Mrs Stubberfield said, describing the service as “under-resourced and under-staffed”.

[At epicentre of Indonesia disaster, Guterres praises resilience of Sulawesi people](#)

Standing amidst the wreckage of Balaroa, one of the worst hit areas of Palu, Indonesia, on Friday, [UN Secretary-General](#) António Guterres said it was “impossible not to feel heart-broken” at the destruction caused by the huge earthquake and tsunami that struck the island two weeks ago.

According to news reports, the village of Balaroa, virtually disappeared into a sinkhole due to the earthquake and around 70 per cent of the population

lost their lives.

Latest figures from the UN humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) say that around 2,000 died overall in the disaster, with 11,000 injured and 680 still officially missing.

The UN chief, talking to reporters in Palu, said it was “the moment to express – and I want to do it on behalf of the UN and, I believe, the whole international community – full solidarity with the people of Sulawesi and the people of Indonesia, and an enormous admiration for the resilience that was demonstrated by the population impacted by this earthquake.”

“Their courage, their spirit of solidarity is remarkable” he added, saying that the response led by the Indonesian government had been “very rapid and effective”.

“As the UN, we are ready to support the government; we already have people on the ground. But the leadership must always be the leadership of the government of the country and the international community needs to be supportive of that effort.”

More to come on this story later...

[DR Congo: Electoral process advancing despite threat of armed groups, UN envoy tells Security Council](#)

December elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remain on course, but still face “major challenges”, including violence from armed groups in the country’s east, the top United Nations official in the country said on Thursday.

The situation is most worrying in Beni, where civilians, security forces, and the [UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC](#) (MONUSCO) continue to come under near-daily attacks, Leila Zerrougui, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the country, told the Security Council via video link from the capital Kinshasa.

“Despite this tempo of attacks,” she said, MONUSCO’s Force Intervention Brigade has “taken an increasingly robust posture in recent months,” she said.

“They undertake proactive long-range patrols to ensure a protective environment, and respond swiftly to alerts, in several recent cases repelling

attacks as they are underway, most recently just two days ago.”

The volatile situation has also complicated the response against a deadly Ebola outbreak in the region which began in August, with local populations in some areas showing mistrust towards health workers and in one case attacking a health convoy, added the senior UN official.

“Responders are currently grappling with the issue of simultaneously scaling up response efforts, both in Beni and in other nearby areas, while adapting the footprint to the deteriorating security situation,” she said.

In her briefing, Ms. Zerrougui, who is also head of MONUSCO, highlighted that the electoral process continues to follow the set timetable, with 21 candidates vying for the presidency; 15,505 for the national assembly; and some 19,640 for provincial assemblies.

She regretted that women’s participation has been very low so far, with only 12 per cent women contesting seats in the national and provincial polls, and only one female candidate for President.

Ms. Zerrougui also thanked members of the Security Council, who undertook a [recent visit to the country](#) and gave them a unique opportunity to witness first-hand the situation on the ground.

Also briefing the Council alongside Ms. Zerrougui, Said Djinnit, the UN [Special Envoy for the Great Lakes](#) region, reiterated the importance of peaceful and credible elections in the DRC for stability in the region.

In that context, his efforts focus on mobilizing “concerted regional and international support” to bring the [31 December 2016 accord](#) to fruition – a political agreement facilitated by the Catholic-affiliated Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO), aimed at achieving a peaceful, managed transition of power, consistent with the DRC’s constitution.

“I encourage sustained regional engagement in support of peaceful, credible and inclusive elections in line with the Agreement,” he added.

Mali not fulfilling its ‘sovereign role’ in protecting its people: UN human rights expert

In an effort to better protect people and their property throughout Mali, the international community must honour commitments to help reduce violent extremism, chronic insecurity and ineffective government, said the United Nations expert on human rights in the country, Alioune Tine, on Thursday.

At the end of a 12-day fact-finding visit, the independent expert said that the “general climate of impunity has been aggravated by the chronic dysfunction of the judiciary with magistrates on strike for more than 70 days.

“The state has not fulfilled its sovereign role in protecting property and people and bringing perpetrators of criminal acts to justice,” added Mr. Tine.

He pointed to a “resurgence of confrontations between members of different communities, the settling of accounts, targeted killings, the use of explosive devices, attacks on humanitarian convoys, kidnappings, robberies, rapes and sexual violence.”

This visit comes just weeks after the formation of a new government, following crucial Presidential elections. A failed military coup in 2012 to remove the then-president erupted in chaos, allowing rebel groups to seize northern parts of the country.

The UN Stabilization Mission in the country, [MINUSMA](#), has become the deadliest peacekeeping mission in the world.

“In the north, as in the centre of the country, there is a real climate of fear and insecurity with a major impact on the lives of people, haunted by daily violence,” said Mr. Tine, in a statement. “This situation is due to the absence of certain state authorities in Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, Mopti and Menaka, including the absence of judiciary, administrative, defense and security systems.

He said that “no woman can board a bus between Gao and Bamanko without risk of physical or sexual violence.” He added that “security measures must be taken so that Mali avoids a lost generation of schoolchildren.”

He noted that more than 332,400 children were denied their right to education during the last school year, while teachers feared attack by armed extremist groups.

The independent expert will present his report to the Human Rights Council in March 2019. During the visit he met members of the Malian Government, political opposition, international community, Malian armed forces, civil society representatives and traditional leaders.

[Do all you can to resolve climate change ‘sticking points’ UN chief](#)

urges South-East Asian Leaders, in Bali

[UN Secretary-General](#) António Guterres, has called for Governments across South-East Asia, to take a lead in the fight against global warming and the damaging impact of climate change.

He was speaking at a leaders' meeting on Thursday of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in Bali, Indonesia.

The UN chief expressed his condolences and solidarity with all those affected by the earthquake and tsunami in the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, and pointed out that four of the countries most affected by the disaster are ASEAN members: Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

He reiterated his strong commitment to the [ASEAN-UN Action Plan on Environment and Climate Change](#); a roadmap containing several measures to improve collaboration between the two organizations, and work towards implementing the UN's [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), described by the UN as a "blueprint to transform the world."

Referring to Monday's special [report](#) from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which laid out the devastating consequences of a world that fails to keep global warming to 1.5°C, Mr. Guterres told the leaders that it "makes clear that climate change is running faster than we are – and we are running out of time."

Urgent action from Member States, said Mr. Guterres, must be far more ambitious, with "unprecedented changes in all aspects of society to cut emissions by half by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050 – especially in key sectors such as land, energy, industry, buildings, transport and cities."

The UN chief described specific examples of action, including an end to deforestation, a drastic reduction of fossil fuel use and a ramping up of renewables; investment in climate-friendly sustainable agriculture; and research into new technologies such as carbon capture and storage.

Mr. Guterres described December's upcoming UN climate summit in Katowice, Poland ([COP24](#)) as a "key moment," and an "opportunity for leaders and partners to showcase their ambition."

"I urge you to do all you can to resolve the sticking points and make sure the world leaves Katowice with critically important implementation guidelines for operationalizing the Paris Agreement," said the UN chief. "This is a must. And I count on ASEAN's leadership."

On Friday, Mr. Guterres will travel to the city of Palu, Central Sulawesi, to see for himself the devastating effects of the tsunami and earthquake.