

'Stand up against intolerance and eliminate discrimination,' says UN chief Guterres

21 March 2017 – Against the backdrop of rising discrimination and violence against those perceived as different, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today urged the world to stand up against intolerance and build communities that recognize diversity not as a source of weakness, but a source of strength and richness.

“In a time of upheaval and change, it is easy to paint vulnerable communities as the cause of problems [...] people are being targeted because of their race, nationality, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation,” warned Mr. Guterres at an event at the UN General Assembly commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Highlighting the particular plight of migrants as well as those, especially women and girls, from minority communities who are often targeted as “scapegoats” and experience racial profiling by authorities, the UN chief underscored the collective responsibility “to do better” and to protect human rights of all.

“We all have a role to play [...] after all, racial discrimination destabilizes societies, undermines democracies and erodes the legitimacy of governments,” he said. “By acting together to end discrimination, we can lift humanity as a whole.”

In his remarks, the Secretary-General also reminded that international law requires States to take effective actions to prevent and eliminate discrimination on all grounds and in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.

RELATED: In Geneva, UN urges upholding human rights amid rising populism and extremism

“They must be vigilant and respond immediately and appropriately, including by prohibiting incitement to racial, national and religious hatred and ending racial profiling,” he said, making a specific call on politicians and leaders to speak up and counter hateful speech.

“Let us stand up against intolerance and eliminate discrimination,” he noted, “Let us join forces in our global campaign – Together for Respect, Safety and Dignity for all.”

Marked on 21 March, the International Day commemorates the killing of 69 unarmed protestors in 1960 in Sharpeville, South Africa, who were staging a peaceful protest against the discriminatory pass laws of the racist apartheid regime.

Assembly honours memory of late Russian Ambassador Churkin

Also today at the General Assembly, UN chief Guterres paid a tribute to Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, the Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations who passed away last month, a day before his 65th birthday.

“Ambassador Churkin was truly one-of-a-kind – an outstanding diplomat, a man of many talents and interests, and a human being whose friendship touched many of us here in this hall today,” said Mr. Guterres in his message, offering his condolences to the late Ambassador’s wife, son and family as well as to the people and Government of Russia.

UN agency voices concern about forced return of Nigerian refugees from Cameroon

21 March 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency today expressed concern that forced returns of refugees from Cameroon’s far north region to crisis-gripped north-eastern Nigeria are continuing despite the recent signing of a tripartite agreement aimed at ensuring the voluntary nature of returns.

So far this year, Cameroon has forcefully returned over 2,600 refugees back to Nigerian border villages against their will, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

“UNHCR is particularly concerned as these forced returns have continued unabated after the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon signed a tripartite agreement with UNHCR in Yaoundé on 2 March,” UNHCR Spokesperson Babar Baloch told reporters at the UN’s Geneva Office.

The forced return of asylum-seekers and refugees is known as *refoulement*, or forced return, and constitutes a serious violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention, both of which Cameroon has ratified.

While acknowledging the generosity of its Government and local communities that host over 85,000 Nigerian refugees, UNHCR calls on Cameroon to honour to its obligations under international and regional refugee protection instruments, as well as Cameroonian law.

Insecurity persists in parts of north-eastern Nigeria, and access to basic services remains limited. Most returning refugees find themselves in situations of internal displacement upon return and are unable to return to their places of origin.

Inside Nigeria, UNHCR teams have heard and documented accounts about

Cameroonian troops returning refugees against their will – without allowing them time to collect their belongings.

Amid the chaos, some families were separated and some women were forced to leave their young children behind in Cameroon, including a child less than three years old.

While recognizing the legitimate national security concerns of the Cameroon Government, UNHCR reminds authorities that refugees are themselves fleeing violence and attacks from Boko Haram and that their access to asylum and protection must be ensured.

Poetry gives us hope to scale and climb 'cloudy summits of our time' – UN cultural agency

21 March 2017 – Poetry gives us hope, the United Nations cultural agency today said, lauding verse's ability to shake us from everyday life and remind us of the surrounding beauty and the resilience of the shared human spirit.

In her message for World Poetry Day, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General Irina Bokova quoted from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

We have not wings, we cannot soar;

But we have feet to scale and climb

By slow degrees, by more and more,

The cloudy summits of our time.

"As old as language itself, poetry remains more vital than ever, in a time of turbulence, as a source of hope, as a way to share what it means to live in this world," Ms. Bokova said.

"By celebrating poetry today, we celebrate our ability to join together, in a spirit of solidarity, to scale and climb 'the cloudy summits of our time'," she noted, in reference to Mr. Longfellow's poem.

UNESCO proclaimed 21 March as World Poetry Day in 1999, calling poetry a "social need" which anchors people to their roots.

One of the main objectives of the Day is to support linguistic diversity through poetic expression and to offer endangered languages the opportunity to be heard within their communities.

UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes dozens of forms of oral expression and poetry, from the Tsiattista poetic duelling of Cyprus, the Ca trù sung poetry of Viet Nam and Al-Taghrooda to the traditional Bedouin chanted poetry of Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

World Poetry Day also celebrates poetry's power to aid peace. UNESCO's new Goodwill Ambassador for Artistic Freedom and Creativity, Deeyah Khan, has said, all art, including poetry, "has the extraordinary capacity to express resistance and rebellion, protest and hope."

In her message today, the Director-General said that the spirit of solidarity created by poetry is essential to reaching the goals set by the international community to fight inequality, poverty and climate change.

"We need this to take forward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to implement the Paris Climate Agreement, to ensure no woman or man is left behind," said Ms. Bokova.

[Nowruz a reminder that heritage helps make resilient, sustainable societies – UN cultural agency](#)

21 March 2017 – In a message on the occasion of Nowruz "the day that celebrates the arrival of the spring season" the head of the United Nations cultural agency urged everyone to embrace the day's values and be inspired by its universal message of peace and solidarity.

"At a time when violent extremism seeks to destroy diversity and freedoms, Nowruz is a reminder of the power of culture and heritage to build resilient and sustainable societies," said Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in her message.

Highlighting that in the midst of global challenges such as violent extremism, Nowruz is a source of confidence and belonging for all, Ms. Bokova noted that the message it conveys is all the more important given the efforts around the globe to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

"Through dance, poems, songs, meals and other social practices, the celebration of Nowruz is a moment for men and women, boys and girls, to pay their respect to nature and wish for a better future," she added.

Nowruz, which marks the first day of spring and the renewal of nature, is

celebrated by more than 300 million people all around the world and has been celebrated for over 3,000 years in the Balkans, the Black Sea Basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and other regions.

In 2009, Nowruz was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a festivity of rich diversity promoting peace and solidarity across regions and generations. The following year, the UN General Assembly welcomed its inclusion on the List.

Quoting Rumi, the famous poet, Ms. Bokova said: 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.' Nowruz is a field where reconciliation and dialogue can take their roots.

It is a field where traditions and rituals are passed from generation to generation, to share moments of togetherness, tolerance, harmony and joy, she noted.

Also today, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) highlighted the importance of Nowruz in promoting cultural diversity and friendship among people.

Extending its best wishes to the people of the country on Nowruz, the UN Mission said that it was a time for renewal and celebration, as well as for promoting values of peace and solidarity between generations and communities.

On the eve of this important day, the UN family in Afghanistan expresses hope that the year ahead brings peace to the Afghan people, who deserve a future free from conflict and filled with hope, said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA.

[Warming earth threatens to release huge amounts of carbon – UN agency](#)

21 March 2017 – Rising temperatures could release massive amounts of carbon trapped in the Earth's soil, the United Nations agricultural agency today reported, warning that soil management could make or break climate change response efforts.

Plants and organic residues take in carbon and then sequester it into soil, creating a vast reservoir of carbon. But when soil is disturbed or degraded, trapped carbon and other greenhouse gases resulting from decay are re-released back into the atmosphere, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) explained in a press release.

This means that the Earth's soil carbon reservoir could either release

massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, or sequester more of them, depending on the management decisions we make going forward," according to the report, *Soil Organic Carbon: The Hidden Potential*.

The report is being presented today at the start of the Global Symposium on Soil Organic Carbon, in Rome.

Speaking at the event, the FAO Director-General Jose Graziano da Silva said that beyond its role as carbon sinks, healthy soils are the foundation for global food security.

"Soils with high organic carbon content are likely to be more fertile and productive, better able to purify water, and help to increase the resilience of livelihoods to the impacts of climate change," Mr. da Silva said.

Improving the health of the planet's soils and boosting their organic carbon content is critical to achieving several of the international development goals established by the Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to eradicating hunger and malnutrition, he added.