

UN rights experts urge action to curb 'invisible threat' of toxic air

24 February 2017 – United Nations human rights experts are calling for strong, urgent action by States to ensure that people around the world can enjoy the human right to live in environments free from contamination.

Air pollution is a major threat to human rights worldwide and toxic air pollutants are associated with an increased risk of disease from stroke, heart disease, cancer and respiratory diseases, including asthma, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and hazardous substances and wastes, Baskut Tuncak, said in a news release issued today by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Three million deaths each year are linked to exposure to outdoor air pollution, according to estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO). There is also growing research evidence indicating that air pollution has become the leading environmental cause of death in the world.

Joining Mr. Tuncak in the appeal are Dainius Puras, the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and John H. Knox, the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Silent pandemic

Children and people in vulnerable situations, including women of reproductive age, the elderly, those in poor health and those living in less wealthy communities remain the most vulnerable, the experts warned.

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 300 million children almost one in seven of the world's total, live in areas with the most toxic levels of outdoor air pollution, a situation paediatricians describe as a 'silent pandemic.'

A threat like this can no longer be ignored

A threat like this can no longer be ignored, they said. States have a duty to prevent and control exposure to toxic air pollution and to protect against its adverse effects on human rights.

The experts said that impunity for those responsible for air pollution is rampant today, with recent reports of environmental ministers even denying its effects, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

They stressed the need for cross-border cooperation to promote the adoption of preventive and control measures in the energy, industrial and

transportation sectors, as well as the need for investment in infrastructures and long-term incentives.

Improving the regulation of toxic emissions from industrial sources and vehicles, strengthening waste management and recycling practices, and promoting renewable energies are crucial steps to effectively address air quality issues and public health, the experts concluded.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts 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.

Perpetrators of recent terrorist attack in Iraq must be held accountable – UN Security Council

23 February 2017 – Condemning, in the strongest terms, the terrorist attack on 16 February in Iraq's capital, Baghdad, the United Nations Security Council underlined the need to bring the perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of such reprehensible acts of terrorism to justice.

The attack killed at least 50 people and injured many more.

In a statement, the 15-member Security Council "reaffirmed that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security."

Further, stressing that those responsible for these killings should be held accountable, the Security Council urged all UN Members States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with the Iraqi Government and all other relevant authorities in this regard.

Council members also reiterated that "any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivation, wherever, whenever and by whomsoever committed," and reaffirmed the need for all UN Member States to combat by all means, in accordance with the UN Charter and other obligations under international law, threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.

Also in the statement, the Council welcomed the efforts of the Iraqi Government and its partners to defeat Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) and to return stability to the country.

Next gen, 'lightning' fast global communication network on track for 2020 entry – UN agency

23 February 2017 – A working group of the United Nations agency which coordinates telecommunication operations and services throughout the world completed today a cycle of studies on the key performance requirements of the next generation mobile networks (5G technology) for the International Mobile Telecommunications (IMT)-2020 systems.

According to the UN International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 5G mobile systems would provide lightning speed, ultra-reliable communications for broadband and the Internet of Things (IoT).

"IMT-2020 will be the global cornerstone for all activities related to broadband communications and the Internet of Things for the future – enriching lives in ways yet to be imagined," said the ITU Secretary-General, Houlin Zhao, in a news release.

The draft report – describing key requirements related to the minimum technical performance of IMT-2020 candidate radio interface technologies, including data rate, bandwidth, latency, area traffic capacity, energy efficiency and reliability – is expected to be approved at the ITU Radiocommunication Sector (ITU-R) 5G meeting in November.

Underscoring the importance of the IMT-2020 standard, François Rancy, Director of ITU's Radiocommunication Bureau said: "The standard is set to be the global communication network for the coming decades and is on track to be in place by 2020." "The next step is to agree on what will be the detailed specifications for IMT-2020, a standard that will underpin the next generations of mobile broadband and IoT connectivity," he added.

According to ITU, early technical trials, market trials and deployments of 5G technologies based on the foreseen developments slated for IMT-2020 are not anticipated.

These systems may not provide the full set of capabilities envisaged for IMT-2020, but the results of these early activities will flow forward into, and assist the development of, the final complete detailed specifications for IMT-2020, noted the UN agency.

ITU added that IMT is the on-going enabler of new trends in communication devices – from the connected car and intelligent transport systems to augmented reality, holography, and wearable devices, and a key enabler to meet social needs in the areas of mobile education, connected health and emergency telecommunications.

Members of the working group responsible for IMT systems, include key actors from the technology industry, national and regional standards development organizations, regulators, network operators, equipment manufacturers, academia, research institutions and ITU member States.

Central African Republic: Senior UN relief official urges access to civilians in north-eastern provinces

23 February 2017 – Amid renewed violence that has led to “successive gross violations” of international humanitarian law in two north-eastern provinces of the Central African Republic (CAR), the most senior United Nations relief official in the country has called for free and unhindered access to civilians impacted by the clashes between rival armed groups.

“It is unacceptable for civilians to pay the price for rivalries between armed groups because of their religious beliefs or political affiliation,” said the Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for CAR, Aboubacry Tall, calling on parties to the conflict in the Ouaka and Haute Kotto provinces to respect and uphold international humanitarian law.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the country, since the beginning of 2017, there have been deadly clashes between rival armed groups in the Haute Kotto and Ouaka provinces to the detriment of civilians who are forcibly displaced.

The town of Bambari, the capital of Ouaka province, currently has 45,000 displaced persons out of a population of 160,000. Since the end of November 2016, about 20,000 new IDPs have been registered. The town of Maloum (63 kilometres north of Bambari), recently received an estimated 4,000 newly displaced persons due to clashes between armed groups in the Haute Kotto and Basse Kotto provinces as well as in the Ouaka province (Ndjoubissi, Ndassima, Ippy, Belengo, Mbroutchou and Atongo-Bakari).

In order to ensure the provision of assistance in compliance with the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, Mr. Tall reminded parties to the conflict of their obligation to “ensure unimpeded humanitarian access with no conditions.” He strongly urges armed groups not to obstruct “the free movement of civilians or humanitarian actors that humanitarian assistance can be delivered to the people in need.”

In a news release issued earlier this month, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSCA) had stressed that two factions of the ex-Séléka armed group, namely the FPRC (*Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de Centrafrique*) coalition and UPC (*Mouvement pour l'Unité et la*

Paix en Centrafrique), represent a threat for civilian populations and that UN peacekeepers will respond in case of violence.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country of 4.5 million people into civil conflict in 2013.

[‘We need to start now’ on road to peace, UN envoy says as Syria negotiations open in Geneva](#)

23 February 2017 – Welcoming the representatives of the Syrian Government and its opposition to the United Nations-facilitated negotiations that opened today in Geneva, Staffan de Mistura reiterated the need to work together for a political solution.

“We face an uphill battle. It will not be easy,” the UN Special Envoy for Syria said, “but we must apply ourselves to this task.”

“Let’s try to work together to end this horrible conflict and lay the foundation for a country at peace with itself, sovereign and unified,” he noted.

Making reference to the Palais des Nations where the intra-Syrian negotiations are being held, he said the UN headquarters in Switzerland was a symbol “unifying all of us” given its history and could be the place where “Syrians started a long, hard journey to peace.”

He stressed that after six years of conflict, people are waiting for a relief from all suffering and dream “for a new road out of this nightmare.”

Mr. de Mistura is continuing to push for a resolution to the conflict based on UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) that endorsed a road map for peace process in Syria, including specific language on governance, constitution, elections, and even how negotiations should be timed.



On 5 August 2016 in Aleppo, Syria, a child with spinal muscular atrophy who needs special medical care, now lives on the streets, after fleeing with her family from attacks and intense fighting in the 1070 neighbourhood. Photo: UNICEF/Khuder Al-Issa

Today’s intra-Syrian negotiations follow talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, where participants agreed on how to monitor the ceasefire effort started in

December 2016.

As in Astana, representatives of Russia and the United States are among the Security Council Member States present at the discussions.

Syrian women and children bearing the brunt

The Special Envoy also pledged to do everything to promote the role of Syrian women in the political efforts.

Earlier today, he was greeted by a group of Syrian women holding a vigil in Geneva for relatives and friends – sometimes children – who had been arrested, abducted or are still missing apparently as a result of the Government or the opposition.

Calling them Syrian mothers, wives and daughters, Mr. de Mistura said they were symbolic of everyone still missing “in this horrible conflict.”

He pledged to raise the issue of detainees, abducted and missing people as part of the ongoing discussions.

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) today urged participants to the talks to put Syria’s children first.

In a statement UNICEF Regional Director Geert Cappelaera said at least 20 children were reportedly killed in attacks in the country since the start of this year, and many more injured.

“The numbers are a grim indication that the cessation in hostilities announced last December has yet to result in real gains in protection and humanitarian assistance for all children in Syria,” Mr. Cappelaera said.

“What if these were your children?” he asked.

VIDEO: UN Special Envoy for Syria, Steffan de Mistura, has acknowledged the “long, hard journey” ahead, while calling on all sides to work together towards a political solution to the country’s protracted conflict.