

Pakistan: UN condemns deadly terrorist attack on Sufi shrine in Sindh province

16 February 2017 – The United Nations has condemned the terrorist attack on worshippers at a Sufi shrine in Sehwan, in Sindh, Pakistan, today, which reportedly left dozens dead and hundreds injured, and for which the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) has claimed responsibility.

This attack, claimed by ISIL/Da'esh, follows a suicide bombing at a rally in Lahore on Monday, and a suicide bombing on a Government compound in the Mohmand tribal area and an attack on a Government van carrying judges in Peshawar on Wednesday, according to a statement issued this afternoon by the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General.

“We extend our condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government and people of Pakistan, and wish a speedy recovery to the injured. We call for the perpetrators of this attack to be brought to justice swiftly,” said the statement, adding that the UN supports the Government of Pakistan in its fight against terrorism in full respect of international and human rights norms.

Yemen: Senior UN aid official ‘appalled’ by airstrikes that kill women and children

16 February 2017 – The top United Nations humanitarian official in Yemen today said he was extremely saddened and appalled by the airstrikes that killed six women and a girl gathering for a funeral in a private residence in the Arhab District of Sana'a Governorate yesterday.

“The manner in which the parties to the conflict are waging this war is taking an unacceptable toll on the civilian population in Yemen and as illustrated by this most recent tragedy, women and children are paying with their lives,” said UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick in a statement.

The statement, issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that health authorities confirm six women and a girl killed, as well as at least 15 other women injured, some gravely. Unfortunately, the number of dead could rise as the critically injured

struggle to survive.

“I am alarmed to see this tragic loss of life further escalate the fighting, with reports of a retaliatory ballistic missile strike into Saudi Arabia’s Asir region,” he said.

This incident comes at a time of severe hardship and suffering in Yemen where imposed import restrictions are causing food scarcity and price hikes resulting in worsening food insecurity and malnutrition across the country.

The economic decline caused by the conflict is leading to the collapse of basic service provision. Sana’a airport remains closed to commercial flights, limiting options for those who need this service to access life-saving medical care and restricting movements in and out of the country.

“The people of Yemen have suffered long enough. Peace is the only solution to help end the suffering in Yemen,” he said, calling on all the parties to return to the negotiation table.

In a separate statement on the incident, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, stressed that every day, across Yemen, civilians are killed by indiscriminate attacks by all parties to the conflict on residential areas in complete disregard of the rules of international humanitarian law.

“Attacks on civilians are unjustifiable, regardless of the circumstances. Women and children in particular have been subjected to unspeakable suffering in this brutal conflict. This should stop immediately,” he said, calling on all parties to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law and respect the sanctity of civilian life.

Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed went on to note that the ongoing military clashes on the Red Sea coast are aggravating an already catastrophic humanitarian situation, with tens of thousands of civilians caught in the war zone without access to humanitarian assistance and unable to flee to safety.

“The military activities in the region threaten to disrupt the import of commercial and humanitarian supplies which could have a terrible impact on the food security for large parts of the population,” he said, urging all parties to ensure the unhindered movement of commercial and humanitarian supplies, without which millions of Yemenis are at risk of death and famine.

Aid obstacles are ‘matter of life and death’ for besieged Syrians, says

senior UN adviser

16 February 2017 – Assurances have been given to humanitarians by the Syrian Government that obstacles to aid deliveries will be removed across the war-torn country, a senior United Nations adviser said today.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, UN Special Adviser Jan Egeland said that the agreement was needed to remove what he called an “administrative quagmire” that has prevented all aid from reaching besieged populations by road so far this year.

Ahead of a round of Intra-Syrian negotiations in the Swiss city next week, Mr. Egeland added that the issue is “a question of life and death” for many.

So far this year, aid agencies and their partners have not reached a single besieged area inside Syria by land. There are 13 of these besieged and hard-to-reach areas in all, where well over 600,000 people are increasingly vulnerable, after six years of war.

Mr. Egeland described the lack of aid deliveries as an “enormous disappointment,” before announcing that the Syrian Government had given assurances that requests to deliver food and medical supplies would be met, rather than being blocked at the last moment.

In recent days “men with guns” had jumped onto more than two in three convoys to unload diarrhoea kits for children and maternity kits for pregnant women, Mr. Egeland said.



UN Senior Advisor, Jan Egeland. UN Photo/Luca Solari (file)

“This must change and can change,” he continued, adding that there had been intensive diplomatic activity by the UN or UN envoys and with the help of members of the task force with the Government of Syria, who say that a new and better system avoiding the “administrative quagmire where we have to have green lights from so many instances that in the end no convoy moves to any besieged area.”

Nowhere is aid needed more than in the so-called ‘Four Towns’ of Foah, Kafraya, Madaya and Zabadani.

“We hope and believe it will change now; it must change now. Because if we are not reaching the ‘Four Towns’ very soon we will see again the scenes that we saw when the whole thing started a year ago: people starving.”

With UN-facilitated talks in Geneva due to begin next week, Mr. Egeland said it would send “a very important signal” if aid convoys that were standing by were allowed through to Al Waer in Homs governorate, another besieged location.

'Mixed results' for Humanitarian Taskforce's first year

Assessing the work carried out by the Humanitarian Taskforce in the year since its establishment by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to boost aid access, he said the results had been mixed.

The ISSG established respective taskforces on humanitarian aid delivery and a wider ceasefire. They have been meeting separately since early 2016 on a way forward in the crisis. Russia and the United States are the co-chairs of the taskforces and the ISSG, which also comprises the UN, the Arab League, the European Union and 16 other countries.

While noting that the taskforce had nearly trebled the number of people reached in 2016 compared with the previous year, he said progress has been hampered of late.

"The Humanitarian Taskforce could provide access especially through the initiatives of the co-chairs Russia and the United States when they were active and working together, but also other Member States helped us in real time in a number of convoys that were stopped and in the end were helped through checkpoints because of diplomatic initiatives," he explained.

As such, "it is a shame that members of the task force were not able to lift a single siege by negotiations in 2016. There is commitment to try to do that in 2017, it could happen through talks in Astana, in Geneva and elsewhere. 'Lift the sieges' is our appeal. Sieges belong in the Middle Ages, they do not belong in 2017," said Mr. Egeland.

Looking ahead, he appealed for the taskforce's co-chairs to do more, along with Member States who have influence on the Syrian Government and armed opposition, such as Iran, Turkey and the Gulf States.

News from the political front

Meanwhile, according to a UN spokesperson, the Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, met in Moscow today with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov.

They discussed the ongoing meeting in Astana and how best it can contribute to the preparations for the Geneva round of negotiations scheduled for next week. Meetings were useful and productive. Other issues, such as humanitarian access and UN-Russia cooperation, were also discussed.

The spokesperson confirmed that a five-member UN delegation is in Astana to lend its expertise in discussions on the consolidation of the ceasefire regime and related issues.

UN and regional partners urge DR Congo parties to resume political talks

16 February 2017 – Increasingly concerned about the political impasse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations and regional partner organizations today urged political actors to work out how to implement the 31 December political agreement on a timeframe for elections.

The UN, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the International Organization of La Francophonie (IOF) today released a joint statement warning that the situation “has the potential to undermine the political goodwill” that led to the signing of the agreement in December.

“The four partner organizations note that six weeks after agreeing on the modalities of a transition period leading to the holding of peaceful and credible elections by December 2017, the parties are yet to conclude discussions on the effective implementation of the agreement,” according to the statement.

The agreement – facilitated by Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO) mediators, and reached in DRC’s capital, Kinshasa, on 31 December 2016 – would result in new elections being held in the country before the end of the year and for President Joseph Kabila to step down.

In today’s statement, the four partner organizations reaffirm the need for all parties to rally behind the mediation efforts by CENCO, and urge all stakeholders “to redouble, in good faith” their efforts to conclude the ongoing talks.

A lack of implementation plans threaten to shake the “legitimacy of the transitional institutions until elections,” the partners said.

Path to Middle East peace ‘riddled with hazards,’ UN envoy tells Security Council

16 February 2017 – Extremism, bloodshed and displacement continue to plague the Middle East, a senior United Nations envoy told the Security Council today, warning that these phenomena are feeding intolerance, violence, and religious radicalism far beyond the region.

“It is critical that we all understand that we must never allow the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict to drift into the abyss of the extremism and radicalism sweeping the region," said Nickolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, briefing the Security Council.

"Palestinians, Israelis and the international community have a duty to act responsibly, avoid escalating tensions, refrain from unilateral actions and work together to uphold peace," he added.

He also drew attention of the Council members to the recently adopted so called "Regularisation Law" which has the potential to retroactively regularise thousands of existing settlement units built on land owned by Palestinian individuals living under occupation, as well as dozens of illegal outposts.

Noting that the "Regularisation Law" is in contravention of international law and that according to the Israeli Attorney General it is also unconstitutional, Mr. Mladenov told the Council that the Supreme Court is expected to rule on its constitutionality soon.

"If the Law stays in place, it will have far-reaching consequences for Israel, while seriously undermining prospects for the two-state solution and for Arab-Israeli peace," he cautioned.

RELATED: Israeli legislation on settlements violates international law, says UN chief Guterres

Also in his briefing, the UN envoy expressed concern over daily violence and so-called "lone wolf" attacks against Israeli civilians. In one such recent incident, six Israelis were injured in a shooting and stabbing attack by an 18-year-old Palestinian from Nablus (a city in northern West Bank).

He further told the Security Council members that the volatile situation in Gaza continued to exacerbate humanitarian and development challenges, related in large part to the crippling closures of the Strip and the continuing political divide.

"This winter has borne witness to a serious electricity crisis which in December left Palestinians in Gaza with only two hours of electricity per day," he said, informing them of UN's work to address the electricity challenges in a sustainable manner.

The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples

He also spoke of the situation in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) areas of operations, noting that the ceasefire between Israel and Syria (under UNDOF area of operations) is holding, albeit in a volatile security environment.

Concluding his briefing, the UN envoy recalled that the Middle East Quartet Report and Security Council resolutions clearly outlined what is required to

advance a sustainable and just peace in the region.

“The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples,” he said, noting that Israel can take the necessary step to stop settlement expansion and construction in order to preserve this prospect, while the Palestinian leadership can demonstrate their commitment to tackling the challenges of violence and incitement on their side.

“This will create an environment that will facilitate bilateral final status negotiations that the international community can support,” he added.