

UN human rights experts call for global treaty to regulate dangerous pesticides

7 March 2017 – Two United Nations human rights experts are calling for a comprehensive new global treaty to regulate and phase out the use of dangerous pesticides in farming, and move towards sustainable agricultural practices.

“Excessive use of pesticides are very dangerous to human health, to the environment and it is misleading to claim they are vital to ensuring food security,” the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, and the Special Rapporteur on Toxics, Baskut Tuncak, said in a joint statement to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The Special Rapporteurs pointed to research showing that pesticides were responsible for an estimated 200,000 acute poisoning deaths each year. Some 99 per cent of fatalities occurred in developing countries where health, safety and environmental regulations were weaker.

Chronic exposure to pesticides has been linked to cancer, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility. Farmers and agricultural workers, communities living near plantations, indigenous communities and pregnant women and children are particularly vulnerable to pesticide exposure and require special protections.

The experts particularly emphasized the obligation of States to protect the rights of children from hazardous pesticides, also warning that certain pesticides can persist in the environment for decades and pose a threat to the entire ecological system on which food production depends.

While acknowledging that certain international treaties currently offer protection from the use of a few pesticides, they stressed that a global treaty to regulate the vast majority of them throughout their life cycle does not yet exist, leaving a critical gap in the human rights protection framework.

“Without harmonized, stringent regulations on the production, sale and acceptable levels of pesticide use, the burden of the negative effects of pesticides is felt by poor and vulnerable communities in countries that have less stringent enforcement mechanisms,” they emphasized.

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.

UN envoy urges protection of children as key to peace-making and conflict prevention

7 March 2017 – The rights of children must also be a cornerstone of conflict prevention, peace-making and peace building efforts, the United Nations focal point on children in armed conflict today told the UN Human Rights Council, expressing deep concern at the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children in the past year.

“In Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen thousands of children were killed and maimed as result of intense conflict,” said the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, said presenting her latest report to the Geneva-based rights body.

Recruitment and use continued at “high levels” in those countries, as well as in the conflicts in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria, Ms. Zerrougui said.

She also warned of the impact that attacks on schools and hospitals have on children’s education and health, as well as the denial of humanitarian aid for children and even besiegement.

In her address, Ms. Zerrougui called on the Human Rights Council and the UN Member States to take all available measures to prevent violations from reoccurring.

In addition, the senior UN official also urged Member States to protect the rights of children associated with armed groups and to treat them as victims instead of perpetrators, saying Member States “cannot lock up a child for his or her entire life and that prolonged detention will only create and feed grievances.”

She urged Governments to follow Niger’s lead to adopt protocols for the handover of children encountered in military and security operations to child protection officers.

Of particular concern is the safety of girls who are targeted for sexual violence and trafficking, and who are often stigmatized and rejected by their communities when they return after being kidnapped by armed groups.

“Priority should be given to preparing and sensitizing communities to their plight,” Ms. Zerrougui said.

She also detailed a number of successes during the past year – as the mandate of the Office of the Special Representative marked its 20th anniversary –

including through the campaign Children, Not Soldiers and the peace process in Colombia.

Today's presentation to the Human Rights Council was the last for Ms. Zerrougui, who steps down this year as the Special Representative.

[Hungarian law that could detain all asylum-seekers violates country's legal obligations – UN agency](#)

7 March 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency voiced deep concern at a new law voted today by the Hungarian Parliament that could lead to mandatory detention of all asylum-seekers, including many children – for the entire length of the asylum procedure – and warned that it would have a terrible impact on people who have already suffered greatly.

“In practice, it means that every asylum-seeker, including children, would be detained in shipping containers surrounded by high razor wire fence at the border for extended periods of time,” Cécile Pouilly, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), told the media today at a news briefing at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG).

“The new law violates Hungary's obligations under international and European Union (EU) laws, and will have a terrible physical and psychological impact on women, children and men who had already greatly suffered,” she added.

According to the UN agency, under international and EU laws, the detention of refugees and asylum-seekers could only be justified on a limited number of grounds, and only where it was necessary, reasonable and proportionate.

That requires authorities to consider whether there were less coercive or intrusive measures to achieve those goals, based on an assessment of the individual's particular circumstances, explained Ms. Pouilly, adding that alternatives to detention should always be considered first.

“Failure to do so could render detention arbitrary,” she said.

Until now, asylum-seekers had been allowed to stay in open reception centres across the country. However, with the new law the people who had entered the country, having passed through the transit zones, would be moved back to those zones and confined to the containers.

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“This is extremely worrying, especially thinking about children being

detained,” noted Ms. Pouilly, adding: “Children should never be detained under any conditions as detention was never in a child’s best interest.”

She also said that the Government had also already erected a razor wire barrier along the entire border with Serbia and, now, only 50 asylum seekers were allowed to enter the country per week, at two crossing points.

Lack of legal pathways to access Europe and because of the closed borders, many people are resorting to smugglers, which make them, and especially children, even more vulnerable and harder to track.

The UNHCR spokesperson further told the media that the physical barriers already erected, together with legislative and policy obstacles, make it nearly impossible for asylum-seekers to enter the country, apply for asylum and receive international protection.

Disasters in Americas show challenge of meeting global risk reduction targets – senior UN Official

7 March 2017 – Disasters in the Americas over the past year such as Hurricane Matthew show the challenge the world faces meeting the risk reduction targets established by the UN’s Sendai Framework.

That’s according to Robert Glasser, head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), addressing the opening of the Fifth Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas, taking place this week in Montreal, Canada.

The Sendai Framework, agreed by 187 Member States in 2015, aims to reduce loss of life and injury by shifting from managing disasters, to managing disaster risk, and being better prepared.

A group of four indigenous elders opened proceedings with prayers and blessings for around 1,000 delegates from across the Americas.

More than 50 countries and territories are represented at the forum, aiming to agree a Regional Action Plan by the time they wrap up their work on Thursday, on the Americas’ contribution towards the Sendai targets, which follow the timetable of the overall 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Mr. Glasser also highlighted the impact of Hurricane Matthew, which ripped through the Caribbean in early October last year, causing widespread devastation to Haiti, including 546 deaths and losses estimated at \$2.78

billion.



Clean up underway in Jeremie, Haiti, on Thursday 6 October 2016 following the passage of Hurricane Matthew on 4 October 2016. Photo: Logan Abassi/MINUSTAH

Sendai means saving life by making economies and societies more resilient, he said.

“Disaster events [...] over the last 12 months in the Americas have highlighted how challenging it’s going to be to achieve those targets,” he said, noting that Matthew, the first Category 5 Atlantic hurricane in almost 10 years was a stern test of the region’s preparedness for an event – or something similar – that is likely occur more frequently in future as a result of climate change.

The UNISDR chief said it had been “heartening” to see the response in Central and South America especially to the “major slow onset disaster event” posed by the El Niño weather pattern of the past few years.

“It’s efforts such as these that we must now build on as we prepare to meet the first deadline of the Sendai Framework, the substantial increase in national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020. These strategies will lay the foundations for a decade of concerted action on reducing disaster losses,” added Mr. Glasser.

The conference is due to end on Thursday, with a Montreal Declaration that will go forward to the 2017 Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction, in Mexico, in May.

[Women’s progress uneven and facing backlash, UN rights chief warns ahead of International Day](#)

7 March 2017 – The United Nations human rights office today launched a joint report with the African Union and UN Women detailing the progress and challenges to women’s struggle for human rights in Africa, while the UN rights chief warned that the women’s movement around the world is facing a backlash that hurts both men and women.

“We need to be alert – the advances of the last few decades are fragile and should nowhere be taken for granted,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said in a statement ahead of International Women’s Day, marked annually on 8 March.

The UN High Commissioner added that it is “extremely troubling” to see recent roll-back of fundamental legislation in many parts of the world.

Such roll-backs are “underpinned by the renewed obsession with controlling and limiting women’s decisions over their bodies and lives, and by views that a woman’s role should be essentially restricted to reproduction and the family,” he said.

While such pushbacks are carried out in the name of tradition, Mr. Zeid noted that they are often a response to segments of society calling for change.

Among examples he gave, Mr. Zeid pointed to recent legislation in Bangladesh, Burundi and the Russian Federation, which weakens women’s rights to fight against child marriage, marital rape and domestic violence, respectively.

He noted also the “fierce resistance” in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua to political and civil society efforts to open up access to sexual and reproductive rights.



High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

“With the world’s young population concentrated in developing nations, retrogressive measures denying women and girls access to sexual and reproductive health services will have a devastating effect,” Mr. Zeid said, noting more maternal deaths, more unintended pregnancies, fewer girls finishing school and the economic impact of failing to fully include women in the workforce.

“In short, a generation without choices and a collective failure to deliver on the promises of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” he added, referring to the internationally agreed action plan for eradicating poverty while assisting all people and maintain the health of the planet.

Meanwhile, Mr. Zeid praised women’s movements in countries such as Argentina, Poland and Saudi Arabia, where women and men took to the streets to demand change, but warned that “it is time to come together to protect the important gains of the past and maintain a positive momentum.”

Women as active agents of change

In Africa, women continue to be denied full enjoyment of their rights in every country, according to a new report released today entitled *Women’s Rights in Africa*.

Statistics show that some African countries have no legal protection for women against domestic violence, are forced to undergo female genital mutilation, and forced to marry while still children.

According to the report, however, in Africa – as around the globe – when

women exercise their rights to access to education, skills, and jobs, there is a surge in prosperity, positive health outcomes, and greater freedom and well-being, not only of women but of the whole society.

“Human rights are not a utopian fairy-tale -they are a recipe for sound institutions, more sustainable development and greater peace,” Mr. Zeid wrote in the Foreword to the report.

“When all women are empowered to make their own choices and share resources, opportunities and decisions as equal partners, every society in Africa will be transformed.”

Among its recommendations, the report calls on African governments to encourage women’s full and productive employment, to recognize the importance of unpaid care and domestic work, and to ensure women can access and control their own economic and financial resources.

The report stresses that women should not be seen only as victims but, for example, as active agents in formal and informal peace building processes.