

UN launches Environmental Rights Initiative

Taking a stand against ongoing threats, harassment and murder of environmental defenders, the United Nations on Tuesday launched an initiative enlisting business communities to champion a clean and healthy environment.

“Those who [struggle to protect planet](#) and people should be celebrated as heroes, but the sad fact is that many are paying a heavy price with their safety and sometimes their lives,” Erik Solheim, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said Tuesday, launching the UN Environmental Rights [Initiative](#) in Geneva.

“It’s our duty to stand on the side of those who are on the right side of history. It means standing for the most fundamental and universal of human rights,” he added.

By helping people to understand how to defend their rights, and by assisting governments to safeguard environmental rights, UNEP maintains that the initiative will bring environmental protection nearer to the people.

Although, since the 1970s, environmental rights have grown more rapidly than any other human right and are enshrined in over 100 constitutions, in January the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Global Witness documented that almost four environmental defenders are being killed weekly – with the true total likely far higher.

Many more are harassed, intimidated and forced from their lands. Moreover, around 40-50 per cent of the 197 environmental defenders killed in 2017 came from indigenous and local communities.

“Violations of environmental rights have a profound impact on a wide variety of human rights, including the rights to life, self-determination, food, water, health, sanitation, housing, cultural, civil and political rights,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said, recounting recent visits to Papua New Guinea and Fiji where he was made keenly aware of the impact of extractive industries and climate change on individual rights.

“It is crucial that those most affected are able to meaningfully participate in decisions relating to land and the environment,” he stressed.

Two disturbing counter-trends are underway. The first is the escalating intimidation and murder of environmental defenders, and the second is some countries’ attempts to limit NGO activities.

“States have a responsibility to prevent and punish rights abuses committed by private corporations within their territory, and businesses have an obligation to avoid infringing on the human rights of others,” Mr. Zeid continued. “I hope this new Initiative will be able to encourage States and

businesses to comply with these obligations.”

Leo Heileman, UNEP director for the office in Latin America and the Caribbean called it “an opportunity to give environmental rights the same legal standing as human rights at the global level.”

Among other things, the initiative will help governments strengthen institutional capacities to develop and implement policy and legal frameworks protecting environmental rights, and assist businesses to better understand their environmental rights obligations and provide guidance on how to advance beyond a compliance culture.

“I am proposing to the UN [Human Rights Council](#) that the UN should join countries in recognizing a global right to a healthy environment,” said John Knox Special Rapporteur on [Human Rights and the Environment](#) . “The time has come to recognize this formal interdependence of human rights and the environment, not only at national level but at the UN level too.”

[‘No other conclusion,’ ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar continues – senior UN rights official](#)

The “frenzied” scale of unspeakable violence against the minority Muslim Rohingya community in Myanmar has shifted to a “lower intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation,” seemingly intended to drive the remaining Rohingyas from their homeland, a senior United Nations human rights official has warned.

“[The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya from Myanmar continues](#). I don’t think we can draw any other conclusion from what I have seen and heard in Cox’s Bazar,” Andrew Gilmour, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, said at the end of a four-day visit to Bangladesh which is hosting more than [800,000 Rohingya refugees](#), most of whom fled Myanmar this past August in the wake of a crackdown by the country’s security forces.

According to the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), a number of refugees told Mr. Gilmour that Rohingyas who try to leave their villages or even their homes “are taken away and never return.”

They recounted incidents where family members were taken away by Myanmar’s security forces and later found dead. Furthermore, people are too afraid to ask what happened – or in cases where they question or protest, are beaten badly.

The nature of the violence has changed from the frenzied blood-letting and mass rape of last year to a lower intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation that seems to be designed to drive the remaining Rohingya from their homes – *Andrew Gilmour*

There is also a “recurring theme” of women and girls being abducted, never to be seen again. Their relatives fear the worst – that they were raped and killed, added OHCHR.

Additionally, while the rate of killings and sexual violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine province has gone down as compared to August and September last year, recent refugees arrivals narrated that towns near the country’s border with Bangladesh are already largely emptied of its Rohingya population and the refugees arriving now are coming from places further inland.

“It appears that widespread and systematic violence against the Rohingya persists,” added Mr. Gilmour, noting that the nature of the violence “has changed from the frenzied blood-letting and mass rape of last year to a lower intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation that seems to be designed to drive the remaining Rohingya from their homes and into Bangladesh.”

Safe, dignified and sustainable returns impossible under current conditions – Andrew Gilmour

The senior UN human rights official also warned that while the Government of Myanmar is “busy telling” the international community that it is ready to receive Rohingya returnees, its forces are continuing to drive them away into Bangladesh.

“Safe, dignified and sustainable returns are of course impossible under current conditions,” stressed Mr. Gilmour.

He underlined that it is inconceivable to expect refugees to return given the immediate threat of almost certain killings, rape and other forms of violence; the impossibility of living at the places of origin, given that all sources of food and livelihood have been destroyed or declared off-limits for most of the remaining Rohingya; and the apparent absence of any will to address the root causes of the violence, which has resulted from decades-long policies of discrimination against the Rohingya, particularly the refusal of Myanmar authorities to recognise their right to self-identification and to grant them citizenship.



UNICEF/UN0120426/Brown

Rohingya refugees walk across the Balukhali settlement in Bangladesh's Cox Bazar district.

Donors must reciprocate Bangladesh's generosity

While in Cox's Bazar – once a sleepy fishing town in southern Bangladesh that has now transformed into the world's largest refugee camp – Mr. Gilmour also drew attention to the fragile living conditions and the threats posed by upcoming, potentially devastating, rains.

Having suffered so much from the man-made disaster inflicted by Myanmar, the fear is that this will be compounded by a natural disaster of heavy rainfall that will almost certainly lead to landslides and flooding – *Mr. Gilmour*

In the capital, Dhaka, Mr. Gilmour also met with Government officials and hailed the country's generosity in welcoming the massive influx of refugees.

"Bangladesh has shown a level of generosity that is sadly lacking in many parts of the world, including in this region," he said, urging the international community to make long-term commitments to assist the refugees, as well as Bangladeshi host communities, in order to share the burden.

He also called on the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that while the refugees remain in the country, they can live in dignity, including by permitting access to some livelihood opportunities and by upholding the right to education of all Rohingya children.

Child marriage numbers drop, but still 'a long way to go' to end practice – UNICEF

Although the prevalence of child marriage is decreasing worldwide, action will need to be stepped up to achieve the global target of ending the practice by 2030, the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) said on Tuesday.

Progress over the last decade meant 25 million child marriages were prevented, the agency reported.

Overall, the proportion of women who became brides before age 18 decreased by 15 per cent during this period: from one in four to approximately one in five.

"When a girl is forced to marry as a child, she faces immediate and lifelong consequences. Her odds of finishing school decrease while her odds of being abused by her husband and suffering complications during pregnancy increase. There are also huge societal consequences, and higher risk of intergenerational cycles of poverty," said Anju Malhotra, UNICEF's Principal Gender Advisor.

"Given the life-altering impact child marriage has on a young girl's life, any reduction is welcome news, but we've got a long way to go."

Worldwide, some 650 million women alive today were married when they were just girls.

UNICEF reported that the largest decline in child marriage in the last 10 years occurred in South Asia.

Rates there dropped by roughly a third: from nearly 50 per cent to 30 per cent, largely due to progress in India.

"Increasing rates of girls' education, proactive government investments in adolescent girls, and strong public messaging around the illegality of child marriage and the harm it causes are among the reasons for the shift," according to a UNICEF press release.

Despite this progress, the UN agency estimates 12 million girls are married off each year.

Eliminating child marriage and other practices harmful to women and girls are among the [targets](#) under the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

The 17 SDGs focus on people, the planet and prosperity, and have a deadline of 2030.

However, UNICEF said “progress must be significantly accelerated” if the child marriage target is to be achieved by this date, warning that an additional 150 million girls could become brides during this time.

Progress particularly needs to be scaled up in sub-Saharan Africa where the “global burden” of child marriage is now shifting, the UN agency added.

The region accounted for close to one in three of the world’s most recently married child brides, compared to one in five a decade ago.

For Ms. Malhotra, the UNICEF gender adviser, every child marriage prevented gives another girl the chance to fulfill her potential.

“But given the world has pledged to end child marriage by 2030, we’re going to have to collectively redouble efforts to prevent millions of girls from having their childhoods stolen through this devastating practice,” she said.

[DR Congo: Flaring tensions could ‘plunge Kasai region into new violence,’ UN warns](#)

The United Nations refugee agency warned Tuesday that ongoing instability in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) poses a grave risk to civilian safety, including for several hundred refugees recently returned there from Angola.

Congolese Government forces have regained control of large areas of the Kasai, but there is sporadic fighting between the armed forces and militia groups, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)).

“Tensions remain high between different ethnic groups, threatening to plunge the region into [new violence](#),” said UNHCR spokesperson Aikaterini Kitidi told reporters in Geneva.

Last month alone, more than 11,000 people fled the conflict. This is in addition to the roughly 900,000 Congolese who have already been internally displaced since the Kasai crisis erupted in 2016. Some 35,000 Congolese have sought refuge in Angola.

UNHCR believes that returns are not yet safe or sustainable, since peace and security are lacking.

However, some 530 Congolese were forced to return from Angola between 25 and 27 February.

“The returns were carried out despite UNHCR’s requests to the Angolan authorities to undertake joint screening of the unregistered group,” the spokesperson said.

UNHCR urges the Angolan authorities to refrain from further forcible returns of Congolese to their country. Should conditions change, UNHCR stands ready to assist the authorities in DRC and Angola in voluntary repatriation discussions.

Support for the returnees to rebuild their houses is often absent, as humanitarian funding does not at present allow for a major rebuilding programme.

For 2018, UNHCR has requested \$368.7 million to help those affected by the crisis in the country. So far, just one per cent of this has been received.

‘Instead of responding to crises, we need to invest far more in prevention,’ says UN chief

The imbalance between spending on conflict, and spending on peace, must be tackled head-on, Secretary-General António Guterres said Monday, urging the United Nations to rally all international actors “for our efforts across the peace continuum – from prevention, conflict resolution and peacekeeping to peacebuilding and sustainable long-term development.”

“Two years ago, the General Assembly and the Security Council came together to send a clear joint message: while Member States have primary responsibility for building and maintaining peace, we can all do more to strengthen the foundations of stability, wellbeing and cohesion,” he [told](#) an informal gathering of the Assembly where he presented his report on [Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace](#).

Noting that the UN must offer “coherent, comprehensive and integrated support, working with Member States and other partners, before, during, and after conflict,” he informed the room that his report puts these messages into practice.

He discussed how inclusive and sustainable development makes a critical contribution to conflict prevention.

“Sustaining peace is both a goal and a process that relies on building a common and cohesive vision of a society that takes the needs of all into account,” he stated, noting that “the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

is our global path to a safer, more sustainable and resilient world.”

Sustaining peace is both a goal and a process – *Secretary-General Guterres*

Mr. Guterres stressed that gender considerations must remain front and centre in all efforts to sustain peace, noting that the importance and effectiveness of women’s leadership and participation in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding are not in doubt.

“We need to increase women’s representation in a systematic and meaningful way that goes far beyond tokenism. Women must be in decision-making roles at all levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict,” he said.

The UN chief underscored that national efforts to build and sustain peace are more effective if they are inclusive.

“This must start from a shared understanding of the risks that a country or region faces, and of how we can support efforts by Member States to build resilience against these risks,” he stated.

He also argued that a failure to adequately finance peacebuilding would undermine other efforts to save lives, stabilize countries in crisis, alleviate suffering and protect the vulnerable.

Reminding the Assembly that the world is witnessing human suffering on a scale hard to comprehend, he noted that in the past 10 years, the international community had spent \$233 billion on humanitarian response, peacekeeping and hosting refugees.

“If the financial cost is unsustainable, the human cost is unbearable,” he maintained. “Instead of responding to crises, we need to invest far more in prevention. Prevention works, saves lives and is cost-effective.”

Mr. Guterres called the [Peacebuilding Fund](#) “a critical tool” to achieve this, urging all able to do so, increase the Fund’s resources to \$500 million annually.

He explained that other innovative financing solutions were also being explored, including web-based mechanisms and crowdfunding.

“These proposals should be seen firmly in the context of peace and security, and should not impact on funds for sustainable development in any way,” Mr. Guterres emphasized.

He expressed his hope the Assembly would consider the report at the [High-Level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace](#) – from 24 to 25 April – and continue its efforts to make the UN system more effective.

Also addressing the informal meeting, General Assembly President Miroslav

Lajčák, mentioned some of the calls made through 2016 resolutions.

“First, we called for a new approach,” he said. “For more capacity for peacebuilding and sustaining peace, on the ground.”

Second, he evoked the call for financing sustained peace, “Not for a month, or a year – but over the long-term.”

Thirdly, he turned to new partnerships in which national stakeholders are “in the driving seat.”

And, finally, for all to take place in a comprehensive, and integrated way.

Mr. Lajčák called the Secretary-General’s report “a strong guide on how we can go forward” and the High-Level Meeting an opportunity “to chart the course ahead.”