

## **‘Protect the momentum’ and seize opportunities offered by latest inter-Korean talks, urges UN chief**

Welcoming the progress in the latest talks between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea, the United Nations Secretary-General has highlighted the need to utilize the opportunities it offers to find a peaceful path forward.

“The Secretary-General is encouraged by the advances made during the latest inter-Korean talks, particularly the agreement to hold a summit meeting soon, to further reduce military tensions, and to discuss denuclearization in future talks with all relevant parties,” read a [statement](#) attributable [Secretary-General António Guterres](#)’ spokesperson.

“He stresses the need to protect the momentum and seize the opportunities available to find a peaceful path forward.”

The statement also noted that the latest developments are further steps forward in laying the foundation for the resumption of sincere dialogue, leading to sustainable peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.

“The Secretary-General reiterates the commitment of the United Nations to further assist in this process with the governments concerned,” it added.

---

## **Victims of Syrian conflict ‘denied any meaningful justice,’ says UN-mandated panel**

Drawing from over 500 interviews, the latest report from of the [Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria](#) – established by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate and record all violations of international law since March 2011 – documents deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and protected objects, starvation, unlawful internment, and the use of chemical weapons.

“It is beyond comprehension that, despite this extensive range of violations, [Syrian victims and survivors continue to be denied any meaningful justice](#),” said Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro.

“Remedies which go beyond calls for criminal justice and address, for example, the situation of tens of thousands of detainees or account for those who have been disappeared or abducted must be given greater attention.”

Looking into the period between July 2017 and January 2018, including the military campaigns against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh) in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, the current [report](#) also revealed that while these offensives appear to have successfully dislodged the terrorist groups, the military success has come at an “extremely” high cost to civilians.

It is beyond comprehension that, despite this extensive range of violations, Syrian victims and survivors continue to be denied any meaningful justice – *Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro*

Concerning eastern Ghouta, where the siege is entering its fifth year, the report highlighted an increasingly cynical means and methods of warfare, that have led to the worst documented cases of severe acute malnutrition over the course of the Syrian conflict, stated the report.

The siege continues to be marked by indiscriminate attacks affecting civilian and protected objects, the use of chemical weapons and cluster munitions, starvation, and the routine denial of medical evacuations, added the Commission, noting also that terrorist or armed groups within the enclave continued to indiscriminately shell Damascus city, resulting in the deaths and severe injuries to civilians.

Elsewhere across Syria, places of worship, civil defence centres, homes, medical facilities, markets, bakeries, and schools continue to be regularly attacked with impunity by warring parties.

In one particularly harmful attack which took place on 13 November, the Commission of Inquiry found that the Russian Air Force carried out airstrikes on a densely populated civilian area in Atareb (Aleppo), killing at least 84 people and injuring another 150.

“The use of unguided bombs, including blast weapons, in a densely civilian populated area may amount to the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death and injury to civilians,” stated the report.

Underscoring the need for the international community to take a broader view of accountability, the Commission of Inquiry urged practical and urgent steps to ensure victims’ needs for justice and accountability are met both immediately and in the longer term.

Recommendations also included the immediate release of children, women, the elderly, and disabled, and access by independent monitors to all places of detention, including those established by armed groups.

Noting that there can be no justification for punishing a whole population through starvation, indiscriminate bombardment, and denial of medical and

humanitarian relief, Commissioner Hanny Megally, said: “This whole conflict has been characterized by a total disregard for the rules of war.”

“All parties must immediately lift all sieges, allow humanitarian access, and stop using strategies that primarily target civilians,” he added.

In addition to Mr. Pinheiro (Chair) and Mr. Megally, the Commission of Inquiry also comprises Karen Koning AbuZayd. Its current report is scheduled to be discussed next week during an interactive dialogue at the 37th session of the Human Rights Council.



UNICEF/UN0162763/Khabieh

A vehicle from the UN-SARC convoy drives past destroyed buildings in eastern Ghouta, Syria.

## **Monday's aid convoy cut short due to escalating violence – UN relief wing**

Meanwhile, the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA) reported that Monday's joint UN-Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) [humanitarian convoy](#) was forced to cut short its delivery due to escalating violence and insecurity on the ground.

[“After nearly nine hours inside, the decision was made to leave for security reasons and to avoid jeopardizing the safety of humanitarian teams on the ground,”](#) Jens Laerke, a spokesperson for the Office, told the media at a regular news briefing in Geneva on Tuesday.

“As a result, 14 of the 46 trucks in the convoy were not able to fully offload critical humanitarian supplies. Of the 14, four were partially offloaded,” he added.

At the same briefing, Tarik Jašarević, a spokesperson for the UN [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), said that close to [8 tonnes of medical supplies were](#)

[delivered](#) as part of the convoy.

He, however, added that during the obligatory routine inspection conducted by Syrian national authorities before the convoy departed, around 70 per cent of the supplies in the WHO shipment were rejected, including all trauma and surgical supplies, dialysis sessions and insulin.

According to WHO, considering the critical situation inside Duma, the rejected items will be re-submitted for the next convoy.

“WHO has long spoken out against the removal or rejection of lifesaving treatments and medical items from aid convoys by national authorities,” said the UN health agency’s spokesperson, noting that that when health items are rejected or removed from UN convoys, that information is reported to the Syrian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Health; the Security Council; the International Syrian Support Group’s (ISSG) Humanitarian Task Force; and relief partners.

“The health supplies provided by WHO [...] are selected after extensive consultations with health partners working in these areas and are desperately needed to save lives and reduce suffering,” highlighted Mr. Jašareviæ.

---

## **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.