

UN relief chief urges Security Council to back aid delivery, more funding for millions of Syrians hit by harsh weather

"Millions are living under tents or tarpaulins or in damaged buildings with no power or heating. There are severe shortages of all the basics – from blankets to baby milk to bandages," [Mark Lowcock](#) told the Security Council, adding that the harsh weather is destroying the makeshift shelters and forcing tens of thousands more people to move.

He said that since late last year, the UN and its partners had been raising funds to support vulnerable Syrians with vital winter items, including plastic sheeting to reinforce shelters, stoves and heating fuel, as well as blankets, jackets and winter clothes.

"We have raised \$81 million so far, which has allowed us to help 1.2 million people. Continued support is critical to ensuring that all those in need can be reached," he said.

Turning to war-battered Idlib, he said weather has been difficult for the people there, where the risk of military escalation continues to loom. Over the second half of last year he had frequently highlighted the growing concerns of the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), which he heads up, about the plight of three million people in Idlib and neighboring areas in north-west Syria, from which civilians simply have nowhere else to flee, should there be a full-scale military incursion into the area.

While a September agreement between Russia and Turkey was followed by a significant decrease in ground fighting and airstrikes, January saw an increase in fighting between non-State armed groups, placing civilians at risk and resulting in injury and death.

"Today I reiterate the importance of sustaining the Russia-Turkey agreement and I remind you that a large-scale military operation in Idlib would have catastrophic humanitarian implications," he said of the deal brokered by the two countries to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefs the Security Council on Syria (file).

Further, Mr. Lowcock recalled that last month, the Council extended the

authorization for the cross-border relief operation into Idlib. As hundreds of thousands of people are reached each month with lifesaving assistance through our cross-border operations, he said: "We must continue to be able to provide food, medicine, tents, critical winter supplies and other help."

Meanwhile, he said some 42,000 people remain stranded in Rukban along the Syria-Jordan border. Conditions in the informal settlement have continued to deteriorate since the last humanitarian convoy to the area, from 3 to 8 November. Eight infants reportedly died there since last month.

"Again, the cold is making the situation even worse. So, it is critical that the parties support a second convoy to Rukban, said Mr. Lowcock, explaining that the UN has been engaged on multiple fronts to ensure that can happen, including by addressing concerns expressed by Russia and the Syrian Government about the security of the convoy and monitoring arrangements for aid distribution.

"On 27 January, we received verbal approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus for the convoy to proceed. Security guarantees have also been received from the Russian Federation and from International Coalition Forces," he told Council members, and planning was now underway for loading of the trucks to begin before the end of the week, and for them to set off by 5 February.

"We call on all parties to ensure that this goes ahead without any further delay," he stated.

UN relief chief's specific asks on Syria for the Security Council

- First, support from all Member States to ensure that the parties respect and protect civilians, with particular attention to the north-west and north-east of the country.
 - Second, the humanitarian convoy to Rukban must be allowed to proceed as planned.
 - Third, for all parties to facilitate safe, regular and sustained humanitarian access, so we can carry out additional needs assessments, deliver to all areas where needs are most severe and monitor the impact of our interventions.
 - And fourth, financing for the immediate life-saving needs in Syria, to help people through the bitter winter, but also to ensure the humanitarian programmes in OCHA's 2019 [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) are well-funded. [A conference in Brussels](#) on 13-14 March will be a critical marker in this regard.
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Mass-graves found of at least 535 killed during 'organized and planned' inter-communal attacks in western DR Congo

A preliminary UN investigation into a massacre reportedly carried out in western Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) last month, reveals that “at least 535 civilians were killed in four attacks”, the UN Mission in the country, [MONUSCO](#), said on Wednesday.

In mid-January, [UN human rights chief](#) Michelle Bachelet, said that according to “credible reports”, hundreds of villagers from the four communities in Yumbi, had been killed during inter-ethnic clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities, during several days, beginning on 16 December. She deplored the “shocking violence” and highlighted the importance of “investigating and bringing the perpetrators to justice”.

The initial investigation conducted by the Joint UN Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), attached to the mission, has concluded that in addition to the dead, 111 other villagers were wounded.

There has been no confirmation of exactly who carried out the killings but the mission said that “the attacks were conducted in an organized and planned manner, and were extremely violent and fast, leaving little time for the populations to flee”.

The wave of violence was allegedly triggered by a dispute over the burial of the customary chief of the Banunu community.

“The team identified a total of 59 burial sites in two of the attacked towns, but do not rule out more sites,” said a statement from MONUSCO on Wednesday. “Furthermore, 967 properties, including churches, schools and health centers were looted or destroyed, and at least 363 boats were destroyed.”

An estimated 16,000 people reportedly fled Yumbi and the surrounding area, to different locations including “some 7,000 persons who, according to the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR), sought refuge by crossing the river into the Republic of Congo. The Mission reports that the security situation is currently relatively calm, with national security forces having deployed to the area.”

The UN and its humanitarian partners have dispatched emergency help in the form of medicine, food, water tablets and malaria kits, and further assistance is on the way.

MONUSCO to support authorities, 'bring justice to the victims', promote reconciliation

The head of the UNJHRO has reported that each communal grave discovered so far – reportedly dug initially by local Red Cross workers and returning family members who had fled – likely contained dozens of bodies, while there were more than 40 other individual graves unearthed, following the joint fact-finding mission that was conducted along with local authorities.

The outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in December took place just weeks ahead of crucial Presidential elections, which had been delayed for two years. Voters in Yumbi were unable to cast their votes, as the Electoral Commission building was among those totally destroyed.

MONUSCO said it “strongly condemns” the violence and is calling for a thorough investigation. The mission said it was ready to support the Congolese authorities to “bring justice to the victims, and promote reconciliation between the two communities.”



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On 6 December 2018, at a UNICEF supported crèche in Beni, in the eastern DRC, Kavira Langa Jemima, an Ebola survivor, bathes 6 month old Josue, who's mother is undergoing treatment for Ebola.

Ebola outbreak in DRC's east, now world's second largest ever

In eastern DRC, the outbreak of deadly Ebola virus disease which began six months ago, has now officially become the second largest ever, the UN reported on Wednesday.

More than 740 people, 30 per cent of them children, have been infected so far, and 460 have died, with a total of 258 surviving the disease. [UN Children's Fund](#) UNICEF, said that I was scaling up its response to help victims, as part of the Government and [World Health Organization](#)-led effort to end the outbreak – the largest in the country's history.

“The response to this latest outbreak continues to be hampered by insecurity, frequent movement of people in the affected areas, and resistance from some communities,” said UNICEF.

“While we have been able to largely control the disease in Mangina, Beni and Komanda, the virus continues to spread in the Butembo area, largely because of insecurity and population movement,” added Dr. Gianfranco Rotigliano, UNICEF Representative in the DRC. “We are scaling up our response and deploying additional staff in the health zones of Butembo and Katwa, where 65 per cent of the new Ebola cases in the last three weeks have occurred.”

'World's deadliest sea crossing' claimed six lives a day in 2018: UN refugee agency

Six people died every day last year trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe – “the world’s deadliest sea crossing” – the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Wednesday, citing ongoing political deadlock over sea rescue and disembarkation.

According to a new [report](#) from the agency, an estimated 2,275 individuals drowned or went missing in the Mediterranean in 2018.

This is despite the fact that Europe saw the lowest number of refugees and migrants arriving for five years, at 139,300, principally Spain (65,400), Greece (50,500) and Italy (23,400).

“Saving lives at sea is not a choice, nor a matter of politics, but an age-old obligation,” said Filippo Grandi, [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#). “We can put an end to these tragedies by having the courage and vision to look beyond the next boat, and adopt a long-term approach based on regional cooperation, that places human life and dignity at its core.”

Traumatised people kept at sea for days

In the last year, shifts in policy by some southern European States have led to numerous incidents where people have been left stranded at sea for days on end, because the boats carrying them have been denied permission to dock.

A boat filled with refugees and migrants from across Africa waits to be rescued by the Sea Watch vessel, in Libya. (file) © UNHCR/Hereward Holland

“Large numbers of often traumatised and sick people were kept at sea for days before permission to disembark was granted,” the report states, “sometimes only after other States had pledged to relocate the majority of those who had been rescued”.

Volunteer rescue boats and their crews have also faced growing restrictions on their operations, the UN report continues, adding that on routes from Libya to Europe, “one person died at sea for every 14 who arrived in Europe”.

This is a sharp rise on 2017 levels, when the rate was one death for every 38 arrivals.

At the same, UNHCR highlights that the Libyan Coast Guard’s decision to step

up operations in 2018 meant that more than eight in 10 of those picked up at sea were disembarked in Libya, where they faced “appalling conditions” in detention centres.

This includes limited access to food, disease and “several” deaths, the UN report notes, confirming abuses that have long been documented by the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)).

Faced with such dangers in the troubled North African state, which has seen violent clashes and political turmoil since President Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, the UN agency forecasts that an increasing number of migrant and refugee vessels will try to evade Libya’s coastguard and make for Malta and Italy this year.

Reaching Europe is ‘final stop’ in nightmarish journey

The highest number of people arriving in Spain was from Morocco and Guinea (13,000 each), while most of those reaching Italy came from Tunisia (5,200) and Eritrea (3,300).

Migrants look out to sea in Lesbos, Greece. IOM/Amanda Nero

More Afghans than other nationals headed to Greece (9,000), followed closely by Syrian refugees (7,900).

“Setting foot in Europe was the final stop of a nightmarish journey on which they had faced torture, rape and sexual assault, and the threat of being kidnapped and held for ransom,” the UN report maintains, in a call for States to dismantle smuggling networks and bring perpetrators of these crimes to justice.

Despite the “political deadlock” among European States on crafting a regional approach to sea rescue and disembarkation, as called for by UNHCR and [IOM last June](#), the report welcomes the fact that several States have committed to relocating people rescued on the central Mediterranean – “a potential foundation for a predictable and lasting solution”.

Thousands of resettlement places were also pledged by States for evacuating refugees out of Libya, it adds.

Human trafficking cases hit a 13-year record high, new UN report shows

“The report was undertaken for a simple reason: if we want to succeed in confronting human trafficking in all its manifestations, we must better

understand its scope and structure,” said Yury Fedotov, UNODC’s Executive Director as he presented the report in New York. “We need to appreciate where human trafficking is happening, who are its victims and who is perpetrating this crime.”

According to the latest figures compiled by UNODC, the record conviction and detection rates could either be a sign that countries have strengthened their capacity to identify victims – such as through specific legislation, better coordination among law enforcement entities, and improved victim protection services – or, that the number of actual instances of trafficking has increased.

While in 2003 fewer than 20,000 cases had been recorded, the number of cases recorded in 2016 had jumped to over 25,000.



UNODC

Main forms of exploitation and profiles of detected victims, by sub-regions, 2016 (or most recent)

Despite improvements in data collection, impunity prevails

Over the last decade, the capacity of national authorities to track and assess patterns and flows of human trafficking has improved in many parts of the world. UNODC’s report notes that this is also due to a specific focus of the international community in developing standards for data collection. In 2009, only 26 countries had an institution which systematically collected and disseminated data on trafficking cases, while by 2018, the number had risen to 65.

However, many countries in Africa and Asia continue to have low conviction rates, and at the same time detect fewer victims which, UNODC stresses, “does not necessarily mean that traffickers are not active”.

In fact, the report shows that victims trafficked from areas of the world with low detection/conviction rates are found in large numbers in other areas of the world, suggesting that a high degree of impunity prevails in these low-reporting regions.

“This impunity could serve as an incentive to carry out more trafficking,” the report warns.

Women and girls remain a major target

“Traffickers the world over continue to target women and girls,” wrote Executive Director Fedotov, in the report’s preface. ‘The vast majority of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and 35 per cent of those trafficked for forced labour are female.’

The report notes “considerable regional differences in the sex and age

profiles of detected trafficking victims.” In West Africa, most of the detected victims are children, both boys and girls, while in South Asia, victims are equally reported to be men, women and children. In Central Asia, a larger share of adult men is detected compared to other regions, while in Central America and the Caribbean, more girls are recorded.

Sexual exploitation, the top form of trafficking

Most of the victims detected globally are trafficked for sexual exploitation, especially in the Americas, Europe, and East Asia and the Pacific. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, trafficking for forced labour is the most commonly detected form. In Central Asia and South Asia, trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation are equally prevalent,

Other forms of human trafficking include: girls forced into marriage, more commonly detected in South-East Asia; children for illegal adoption, more common in Central and South American countries; forced criminality, mainly reported in Western and Southern Europe; and organ removal, primarily detected in North Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe.

Many other forms, such as trafficking for exploitation in begging, or for the production of pornographic material, are reported in different parts of the world.

Armed conflict and displacement, a key driver of human trafficking

The report shows that armed conflicts can increase vulnerability to trafficking in different ways as areas with weak rule of law and lack of resources to respond to crime, provide traffickers with a fertile terrain to carry out their operations, preying on those who are desperately in need.

Armed groups and other criminals may take the opportunity to traffic victims – including children – for sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, forced marriage, armed combat and various forms of forced labour. This is the case for example in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East, South-East Asia and elsewhere.

In some refugee camps in the Middle East, also, it has been documented that girls and young women have been ‘married off’ without their consent and subjected to sexual exploitation in neighbouring countries.

In addition, recruitment of children for use as armed combatants is widely documented. UNODC’s report notes that within conflict zones, armed groups can use trafficking as a strategy to assert territorial dominance, spread fear among civilians in the territories where they operate to keep the local population under control. They may also use women and girls as ‘sex slaves’ or force them into marriages to appeal to new potential male recruits.

The study shows that in all the conflicts examined for the report, forcibly displaced populations (refugees and internally displaced families) have been specifically targeted: from settlements of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, to

Afghans and Rohingya fleeing conflict and persecution.

Notably, the risk faced by migrants and refugees travelling through conflict areas, such as Libya or parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is also well documented: in Libya, for example, militias control some detention centres for migrants and refugees and are coercing detained migrants and asylum seekers for different exploitative purposes.

“While we are far from ending impunity, we have made headway in the 15 years since the Protocol against Trafficking in Persons entered into force,” said UNODC’s chief Mr. Fedotov, as he noted that “nearly every country now has legislation in place criminalizing human trafficking”.

“The international community needs to accelerate progress to build capacities and cooperation, to stop human trafficking in conflict situations and in all our societies where this terrible crime continues to operate in the shadows,” he stated in the report’s preface.

Watch the full launch event for the 2018 report here:

Palestine refugee crisis ‘expanding’; leaving highest number at risk this century across Gaza

“Alarming and expanding” problems affecting Palestine refugees, risk further destabilizing the Middle East, the head of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, [UNWRA](#), said on Tuesday.

In an appeal for \$1.2 billion to fund vital services and life-saving aid for 5.4 million Palestine refugees in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl explained that people’s basic needs had worsened considerably since the turn of the century.

“We provide food assistance to a million people in Gaza, which is half of the Gaza population. UNRWA provides that food assistance every three months,” he explained.

“That is a figure the world should be shocked about, because in the year 2000, we used to provide food assistance to 80,000. So, we’ve moved from 80,000 people on our food assistance list to one million. Why? Because the whole dynamic of the conflict and the blockade has wiped out entire sectors of the Gaza economy.”

Speaking in Geneva, Mr Krähenbühl praised the generosity of Member States in supporting the agency's work, following the withdrawal of funding by the United States, historically its biggest donor by far for decades.

UN rights office 'deeply concerned' over shooting death in West Bank

Meanwhile, the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) on Tuesday expressed deep concern over the "protracted and extremely violent attack" in the West Bank village of Al Mughayyir last Saturday, during which a 38-year-old Palestinian father of four, Hamdi Taleb Na'asan, was shot in the back and killed.

"The monitoring by our staff in the West Bank suggests that the killing took place after a group of up to 30 Israelis – some of them armed – from the nearby Israeli outpost of Adei Ad, first of all attacked Palestinian farmers in their fields", said spokesperson Rupert Colville, briefing reporters at the UN in Geneva. He said that settlers "then descended on the village itself where they used live ammunition to shoot at the villagers and their houses."

He added that six villagers had been shot "with live ammunition, leaving three of them in a serious condition. It is unclear whether any settlers were also injured, and if so how many."

He said that although Israeli security forces were stationed near the village and "were immediately alerted to the attack, witnesses informed our staff – who visited the village yesterday – that it took some two hours before they intervened."

When they did step in, added Mr. Colville, "the main focus of their action appears to have been to disperse the Palestinian villagers using teargas. Three more Palestinians were injured by live ammunition after the intervention of the security forces."

He said there had been a rise in settler-instigated violence in the West Bank, "which has reached its highest levels since 2015."

According to the UN humanitarian affairs office [OCHA](#), the average number of violent incidents instigated by settlers per month increased by 57% in 2018 compared to 2017, and by 175% in comparison to 2016.

The Israeli security forces have opened an initial probe into the killing of Mr. Na'asan, and we welcome this", said Mr. Colville. "We urge the authorities to ensure there is a full investigation into his killing and the injuries caused to others, and that it is independent, transparent and effective."