

# Nineteen-year-old education activist and Syrian refugee appointed UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador

19 June 2017 – In a historic first, the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has appointed 19-year-old Muzoon Almellehan, who has been advocating for girls’ education since fleeing war-torn Syria in 2013, as its newest and youngest Goodwill Ambassador.

As a refugee, I saw what happens when children are forced into early marriage or manual labour – they lose out on education and they lose out on possibilities for the future,” said Ms. Almellehan, recalling that when she fled, the only belongings she was able to take with her were her school books.

[I am proud to be working with UNICEF to help give these children a voice](#) and to get them into school,” she added.

Ms. Almellehan, is also the first person with an official refugee status to become an Ambassador for the UN agency. Since fleeing her homeland, she had been living in Jordan for three years, before being resettled in the United Kingdom.

In a news release today, UNICEF noted that it was during her 18 months in the Za’atari camp (in Jordan) that she began advocating for children’s access to education, particularly for girls.

Muzoon’s story of bravery and fortitude inspires us all,” said Justin Forsyth, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, in the release, adding: “We are very proud she will now become an Ambassador for UNICEF and children around the world.”

In April this year, Ms. Almellehan – dubbed ‘the Malala of Syria’ – travelled to areas affected by the Boko Haram conflict in the Lake Chad region where she met with children forced out of school due to the violence.



UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Muzoon Almellehan meets students at the School of Peace at an internally displaced peoples site in the Lake Region, Chad, during her visit to the region in April 2017. Photo: UNICEF/Sokhin

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Since her return, Ms. Almellehan has been working to promote understanding of the challenges children affected and uprooted by conflict face in accessing education, noted the UN agency.

According to UNICEF data, an estimated 25 million children of primary and secondary school are out of school in conflict zones around the world. For children living as refugees, only half are enrolled in primary school and less than a quarter are enrolled in secondary school.

Furthermore, education in emergencies also suffers with severe underfunding.

Since 2010, less than 2 per cent of humanitarian funding has been spent on education. At present, some \$8.5 billion are needed annually to close this widening gap.

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## UN chief ‘deeply saddened’ by the many lives claimed by raging wildfires in Portugal

18 June 2017 – ‘Shocked and horrified’ at the many lives claimed by the devastating fires that hit the Pedrógão Grande region of Portugal, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres today expressed his deep sadness and condolences to the Portuguese Government and people.

In a [statement](#), the Secretary-General said he spoke earlier today with the President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, and with the Prime Minister, António Costa, expressing his deep sadness.

According to news reports, the fast-moving wildfires ripped through the forested Pedrógão Grande central region of Portugal, some 150 kilometers (95 miles) northeast of Lisbon, leaving dozens dead and more injured.

“I wish a speedy recovery to the injured. At this time of loss, my thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones of the victims,” said Mr. Guterres.

The UN chief went on to commend the Government, firefighters, emergency responders and civil society organizations who are sparing no efforts to battle the wildfire and help people in need.

“The United Nations stands ready to assist in any way possible,” the Secretary-General concluded.

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# Help preserve land – our ‘home and future’ – UN urges on World Day to Combat Desertification

17 June 2017 – With hundreds of millions of people around the globe directly affected by desertification and the degradation of land ecosystems due to unsustainable farming or mining practices, or climate change, United Nations agencies have called for better management of land so that it can provide a place where individuals and communities can build a future.

Population growth means [demand for food and water](#) is set to double by 2050 but crop yields are projected to fall precipitously on drought affected, degraded land. More than 1.3 billion people, mostly in the rural areas of developing countries, are in this situation, said Monique Barbut, the Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) secretariat, in her message on the [World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought](#).

So this year, the Convention is calling for a focus on making the land and life in rural communities viable for young people [...] let us give them better choices and options.

According to estimates, nearly 500 million hectares of once fertile land and close to two million square miles have now been abandoned.

The UNCCD believes that with access to new technologies and to the knowledge, these lands can build resilience to extreme weather-elements like drought and with the right, feed a hungry planet and develop new green sectors of the economy.

Let us give young people the chance to bring that natural capital back to life and into production [which can then] develop markets for rural products and revitalize communities, added Ms. Barbut, calling for increased and relevant investments in land, rural infrastructure and skills development so that the future can be bright.

The role of environment change is also increasingly clear in motivating or compelling people to migrate or become displaced.

Desertification is a global phenomenon that threatens everyone  
chief Irina Bokova

With [more land getting lost to desertification](#), rural populations relying on pastoral livelihoods, agriculture and natural resources will face additional vulnerabilities, compounding poverty, poor levels of education, lack of investment and isolation, voiced Irina Bokova, the head of

UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)).

To address this growing threat, Ms. Bokova called for a two pronged approach: first, better land management to arrest desertification as well as for preserving its productivity; and second, strengthening resilience of vulnerable populations by supporting alternative livelihoods.

“We must recognise that desertification is a global phenomenon that threatens everyone and we must start to act globally to build a sustainable and stable future for all,” she underscored.

The UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) also highlighted the challenges noted by Ms. Bokova.

Erik Solheim, the Executive Director of UNEP, added: “[Desertification and land degradation] drives human displacement by threatening lives over the short term and making people’s livelihoods untenable over the long term, [particularly the poorest and most vulnerable](#).”

Given the significant challenges that loss in arable land and their impact in overall socio-economic conditions of affected populations, the subject also features prominently in the [2030 Agenda](#)’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

[Goal 15](#), in particular, calls for combatting desertification, and undertaking efforts to halt and reverse land degradation.

In August this year, countries from the Latin American region will be meeting in Bolivia’s in Santa Cruz de la Sierra where they will discuss better drought management and preparedness.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) “the UN agency that closely monitors global weather and climate patterns and provides member States with climate information to make effective decisions” is one of the organizers of the meeting along with UNCCD.

“Providing state of art climate information [is key] for [climate change adaptation](#) in vital sectors such as agriculture, food security and social well-being,” said WMO Secretary-General Peter Taalas in his message on the World Day, warning: “Increased frequency of droughts can lead to land degradation and eventually, if unchecked, to increased desertification.”

Commemorated annually on June 17, World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought seeks to promote public awareness of land degradation and to draw attention to the implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification “the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management.

This year’s commemoration focuses on the theme “Our Land. Our Home. Our Future.”

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## [‘No limit’ to cruelty of traffickers, says UN agency, as video surfaces of abused migrants in Libya](#)

16 June 2017 – Two United Nations agencies have voiced ‘deep concern’ for the safety of hundreds of migrants and refugees – including many children – held captive by smugglers or criminal gangs at an unknown location in Libya after videos showing their abuse was posted on Facebook.

The UN International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) has confirmed that the videos are authentic.

According to the agency, short video clips have also been sent to families of those held captive, threatening that they will be killed if ransoms (ranging between \$8,000-\$10,000) are not paid.

“Seeing a Facebook video of innocent migrants and refugees who have been abused and tortured is deeply concerning,” said Mohammed Abdiker, IOM Director of Operations and Emergencies, in a [news release](#).

“The cruelty of the human traffickers preying on vulnerable [refugees and migrants](#) in Libya does not seem to have a limit,” [added](#) Amin Awad, the Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), calling for their immediate release.

Those seen in the video are from Somalia and Ethiopia but other nationalities could also be present, noted IOM.

It added that migrants and refugees travelling to Libya from the Horn Africa, are particularly vulnerable in the Raybana area on the country’s southern border with Sudan, where many are frequently abducted.

***Social media and tech firms need to recognize the extreme harm – IOM official***

The agency also drew attention to the increasing trend of abuse of digital and social media platforms by smugglers or criminal gangs and called on such firms to be more vigilant.

“This is a global problem where a smuggler or a criminal gang can easily use digital platforms to advertise their services, entice vulnerable people on the move and then exploit them and their families,” said IOM’s Mr. Abdiker.

Social media, including Facebook, has a duty to better police content on its channels [...] We are not accusing Facebook of complicity [but emphasizing] that these channels are being abused

by criminals Leonard Doyle, chief spokesperson for IOM in Geneva

“It is high time that social media and tech companies recognize the extreme harm that is occurring because of their failure to monitor and react to situations of grave human rights abuses [...] that are being shared through their channels,” he added.

Also today, the head of IOM operations in Libya, Othman Belbeisi, said that the agency is working closely with all partners in trying to locate the migrants.

“[We are] supporting Libyan efforts in the fight against the smuggling networks and we are very concerned about the current situation,” noted Mr. Belbeisi, adding that IOM would continue to use its staff in the region in coordination with the authorities to assist in tracing and potentially aiding in the rescue of these victims.

Some of the captives in the videos have been missing for up to six years, according to their families in Somalia, noted IOM.

The videos, made by a journalist based in Turkey (who recorded the call he received from the criminal gang, and posted it on Facebook on 9 June) [show hundreds of emaciated and abused male migrants and refugees sitting on the floor in a crowded space.](#)

They said that been beaten and tortured.

***Large concrete block placed on a young, starving man as punishment***

Some of them also reported that their teeth have been removed, their arms broken, they have not been fed, and that women and girls have been put in different cells, where these men fear they are being abused both sexually and physically.

“I have been here one year. I am beaten every day. I swear I do not eat food. My body is bruised from beating,” said one of the captives in the video. “If you have seen the life here you wouldn’t stay in this world any more. I didn’t eat the last four days but the biggest problem is beating here. They don’t want to release me.”

IOM noted that throughout the video there are exchanges between the journalist and the person moderating on site in Libya.

In one instance, he introduces the journalist to a young visibly starving man with a large concrete block weighing down on his back, as punishment for his family not paying his ransom.

They broke my teeth, they broke my hand...A captive shown in the video

“I was asked for \$8,000,” said the young man, when asked by

journalist why the criminal gang were punishing him. “They broke my teeth. They broke my hand. I have been here 11 months [...] This stone has been put on me for the last three days. It’s really painful.”

“I was here one year,” said another captive on the video (from Ethiopia), pleading with the journalist for help.

“We want help. My brother, my brother, we are dead! We are beaten 24 hours a day, brother I am begging you! Brother I beg you, do whatever you can do. I can’t sleep, my chest hurts so much because they beat me with big pieces of steel every hour. They put us out in the sun. They do not give us food for days. Brother, we want you can take us back to our country!”

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## Terrorist attacks ‘major’ hurdle to peace in Mali, UN mission chief tells Security Council

16 June 2017 – Despite progress towards peace in Mali, terrorist attacks remain a major obstacle, the head of the United Nations peacekeeping operation there told the Security Council today.

Mahamat Saleh Annadif, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission, known by its French acronym, MINUSMA, [reported](#) significant progress on implementing the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation over the past months, but agreed that terrorists and extremists were gaining ground as existing tensions threatened to derail achievements.

“Mali’s central region is a continuing source of concern,” said Mr. Annadif as he encouraged the Council to focus on the pressing security challenges and “to send a strong message that civilian killings must end” while considering the renewal of MINUSMA’s mandate.

Since Security Council resolution 2295 (2016) gave the Mission a “robust” mandate, noted the envoy, “financial support must continue to ensure its ability to maintain its full functions, including the ability to assist Mali’s armed forces.”

While scaling up support for the Agreement, MINUSMA would also continue to assist international mediation efforts and strengthen national capacity, he explained, saying that “although neighbouring countries had committed recently to deploying uniformed personnel and equipment, the lack of escort and convoy battalions was a major roadblock to continued progress.”

Mr. Annadif went on to note that the National Understanding Conference had

been held satisfactorily, further indicating that the Charter for Peace, Unity and Reconciliation was being developed. In addition, the interim authorities had been established in the five regions concerned.

The various operational coordination mechanisms and joint patrols are on track, he told the Council, while the process of security sector reform, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration continues, although the pace is slow.

These are, according to Annadif, among many positive developments, in addition to the institutional and political reforms, that are to be credited to the Government.

However, he warned, these positive developments risk being annihilated by the tension that has existed for some time between the Azawad Movement Coordination (CMA) and the Platform, which has turned into a conflict Community.

Unfortunately, these practices are the bedrock of terrorists and other extremists, which reinforce each other, both in their operational mode and in the sophistication of the equipment used, Annadif said. More seriously, they extend their areas of influence and influence.

The Mission therefore aims to strengthen its presence in the central region, he said, within the framework of an integrated and multidimensional approach in partnership with other actors such as the European Union. The forthcoming deployment of the rapid reaction force is part of this arrangement.