

South Sudan: 'Fighting stop now' so millions can be spared from famine, say UN agency chiefs

24 May 2017 – Despite “appalling conditions” in South Sudan, it is not too late to save more people from dying, the head of the United Nations agriculture agency said today, joining the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) chief in a call to all parties enmeshed in the country’s conflict to end the violence and work together to ensure access to food and other life-saving support.

José Graziano da Silva, head of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) and WFP’s David Beasley made the call during a visit to the former Unity state, one of the areas in South Sudan worst hit by the current hunger crisis.

“We can still avoid a worsening of the disaster, but the fighting has to stop now,” Mr. Graziano da Silva said. “There can be no progress without peace. People must be given immediate access to food, and farmers need to be allowed to work on their fields and tend to their livestock,” he added.

Around 5.5 million people in South Sudan, or almost half the population, face severe hunger ahead of the lean season, which peaks in July. Of these, more than 90,000 face starvation with famine declared in parts of former Unity state while another one million teeter on the brink. The UN stresses that this unprecedented situation reflects the impact of ongoing strife, obstacles to delivering humanitarian assistance and declining agricultural production.

Both UN officials stressed that an immediate, massive response is critical, combining emergency food assistance and support for agriculture, livestock and fisheries.

‘The fighting must end’ so investment in children can begin, WFP’s Beasley

In the former Unity state, they visited people coping with the hunger crisis with the support of both agencies and met with people facing famine on Kok Island, a refuge in the Nile River where many people have sought shelter from fighting.

The two agency heads saw aid workers from international and local partner organizations distributing WFP food and nutrition treatments, as well as seeds and FAO fishing kits.

“Food, treatment for malnourished kids, kits that help people fish and grow vegetables – these are the difference between life and death for people we met in Unity state,” Mr. Beasley said. “But we can’t keep scaling up forever. The fighting has to end to make the kind of investments that give the children of South Sudan any hope for the future they deserve.”

'Saving livelihoods saves lives,' says FAO's Graziano da Silva

The two UN agency heads visited an FAO project aiming to provide women farmers and pastoralists with a place to process milk. With rising malnutrition levels across the country, the project is an innovative way to increase the availability of safe, quality milk and milk products – a major dietary staple and a source of protein vitamins and minerals, essential components for a healthy diet.

Mr. Graziano da Silva highlighted that saving livelihoods also saves lives, saying “South Sudan has great potential – it has land, water and courageous people. If it also has peace, then together we can work to end hunger.”

Both agency heads underscored the need for further international support to confront a \$182 million funding gap over the next six months.

Mr. Beasley assured that while WFP would continue to stand by the South Sudanese, its leaders “must show good faith by facilitating humanitarian efforts, including getting rid of unnecessary fees and procedures that delay and hinder aid.”

[Preserving cultural heritage, diversity vital for peacebuilding in Middle East – UNESCO chief](#)

24 May 2017 – Protecting cultural diversity is vital for peacebuilding in the Middle East, the head of the United Nations cultural agency said today, pledging solidarity with the victims of ethnic and religious violence in the region, and highlighting the need for both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power.

Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [made this call](#) at the Madrid Conference, hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain. The conference is a follow up to a [open debate](#) in the UN Security Council and the [Paris Conference](#) on the victims of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East.

Citing the ongoing cultural destruction and the dramatic situation of persons belonging to communities targeted and threatened for ethnic or religious reasons in the Middle East, the UNESCO chief said: “Violent extremists target both heritage and human lives – they target victims and minorities from all backgrounds, Shebak, Turkmen, Yezidis, Muslims, Christians..., as symbols of the pluralism they abhor.”

“Violent extremists target schools, because they know the power of knowledge

to counter their rhetoric drawing on false visions of faith and history, they destroy culture, because they know it can foster dialogue and help people live together in their diversity,” she added.

RELATED: [World needs ‘soft power’ of education, culture, sciences, to combat ‘ancient hatreds’– UNESCO chief](#)

The aim of the Madrid Conference is to examine actions taken and determine most urgent priorities, as well as identifying programmes, projects and actions to enable displaced populations to return and to foster reconciliation and stabilization.

Also attending the event was Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfonso Maria Dastis Quecedo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan, Ayman H. Safadi and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari.

At the conference, Ms. Bokova also highlighted the role of the international community in tackling the complex issue. “We need ‘hard power’ to respond, we need ‘soft power’ to prevent, through education, culture and information,” she said. “This is the role of UNESCO and the goal of the United Nations, its Counter-Terrorism Strategy in support of Member States.”

The Director-General went on to note the importance of teaching peace and providing people with the skills to overcome mistrust and division, and to build dialogue. This underpins all of UNESCO’s action to prevent violent extremism through emergency education and the protection of heritage.

[UN rights chief concerned about health of Palestinian hunger strikers in Israel jails](#)

24 May 2017 – The United Nations human rights chief today expressed serious concern about the health of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons as their hunger strike entered its 38th day without resolution.

“I am especially alarmed by reports of punitive measures by the Israeli authorities against the hunger strikers, including restricted access to lawyers and the denial of family visits,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein [said](#) in a news release from his Office ([OHCHR](#)).

“The right of detainees to access a lawyer is a fundamental protection in international human rights law that should never be curtailed,” he added.

The Palestinian prisoners began a hunger strike on 17 April, demanding, amongst other things, an end to administrative detention and solitary

confinement. They are also demanding an increase in the number and length of family visits and improved access to healthcare.

“Various international bodies have repeatedly called on Israel to end its practice of administrative detention,” Mr. Zeid said, noting that such detainees should either be charged with an offence and tried, according to international standards, or released immediately.

An estimated 6,300 Palestinians are currently being held in Israeli prisons, mostly outside the occupied Palestinian territory, in contravention of article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

[‘All roads should lead to universal healthcare,’ says new WHO chief](#)

24 May 2017 – The newly-elected head of the United Nations World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, outlined his priorities for journalists at the agency’s headquarters today in Geneva, where he stressed the need for Member States to provide healthcare for all and to implement international health regulations.

Looking at the work ahead, [Dr. Tedros](#) stressed that the original reason the UN health agency was set up nearly 70 years ago remains true today: providing healthcare for all.

“All roads should lead to universal health coverage,” he underscored, and this mantra should be the WHO’s “centre of gravity.”

“What the world promised when WHO was instituted in 1948 – health for all – is true today, but half of our population still does not have access to healthcare, universal health coverage [...] I think it’s time to walk our talk. The whole world is asking for that [...] health as a rights issue, an end in itself.”

Another key WHO mission is managing global health emergencies, Dr. Tedros said, pointing to changes put in place by his predecessor Dr. Margaret Chan, that had led to the swift detection of the [current Ebola outbreak](#) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

But more reforms need to be made, the new WHO head insisted, suggesting the need for governments to fast-track internationally agreed regulations to deal with epidemics better in future.

He said that another major issue was regaining confidence in Member States and ensuring the best use of their contributions.

Dr. Tedros, of Ethiopia, will begin his five-year term on 1 July 2017, WHO said in a statement following his election yesterday.

Among his previous positions, Dr. Tedros was Ethiopia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and, prior, Minister of Health.

He also served as Chair of the Global Fund and of the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Partnership Board (RBM), where he secured "record funding" for the two organizations and created the Global Malaria Action Plan, which expanded RBM's reach beyond Africa to Asia and Latin America, according to the UN agency.

[Top UN official in South Sudan urges Security Council to advance 'common strategy' on political process](#)

24 May 2017 – The head of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in South Sudan today urged the Security Council to unite behind a common strategy for advancing the political process and peace in the crisis-torn country.

Addressing the Council in New York via video link, David Shearer, the Secretary-General's Special Representative in South Sudan and the head of the Mission, known as UNMISS, said that "unity of purpose will [send the best signal](#) to South Sudan's political leaders to focus first and foremost on the plight of their citizens."

He also called for a "coherent and unified regional position" to aid political developments in the country, noting that Governments in the region hold "significant influence" on political developments to end the three-year war but are not communicating the same message.

Today's briefing comes as President Salva Kiir again declared a unilateral ceasefire from Juba and pledged to review the cases of political prisoners.

Mr. Shearer said these announcements are "very welcome" but "the proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating." He noted that there will be close scrutiny on the number of prisoners released and whether the ceasefire monitoring group can perform its work.

The senior UN official also noted that President Kiir formally launched a National Dialogue this week meant to end the conflict begun in December 2013, but has excluded his political rival and former deputy, Riek Machar.