

Brussels Syria pledging conference meets amid upsurge in Idlib violence

Foreign ministers from more than 50 countries gathered on Thursday at a joint European Union-UN pledging conference seeking nearly \$9 billion in lifesaving support for Syria, as the threat of intensifying conflict loomed once again across the war-torn country.

In a video appeal to those attending the high-stakes event, UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) urged countries to “renew your financial, humanitarian and political commitments to the Syrian people, and to the countries and communities hosting refugees”.

He added: “Only a political solution based on [Security Council Resolution 2254](#) can bring sustainable peace to Syria.”

In Brussels, UN emergency relief chief and head of [OCHA](#), [Mark Lowcock](#) expressed increasing alarm at the deteriorating situation in Idlib in the north-west of Syria, where more than 90 people were killed by shelling and airstrikes last month, nearly half of them children.

His comments follow reported airstrikes on the opposition-held Governorate of Idlib, which is home to around three million people and numerous armed groups, who established themselves there are being driven from previous rebel strongholds.

Describing the conflict as “one of the great crises of our time”, Mr. Lowcock added that a large-scale military assault on Idlib “would create the worst humanitarian catastrophe the world has seen in the 21st century”.

Elsewhere in Syria, “many places are calmer than a year ago”, the UN official added, before warning that the “last pockets of ISIL-controlled land” in the north-east are experiencing “ongoing and even escalating violence”.

Apart from the constant threat of violence, Syrian families face increasing hardship, Mr. Lowcock explained, with eight in 10, living below the poverty line and food-costs six times higher than before the war.

Healthcare provision is “hopelessly inadequate”, the UN official continued, from maternal to reproductive services, nutrition support and treatment for disease, while the majority of the 6.2 million people displaced inside Syria need help with shelter.

Hopeful signs from Brussels

By the middle of the day, Mr. Lowcock told journalists that it looked as if “at least \$6.5 billion” and possibly close to \$7 billion had been pledged. “That is a very significant result and if that is where we end up at the end of the day we will be pleased,” he said.

"Firstly, because this will be an important signal of the international community solidarity with the people of Syria inside the country and with the neighbours of Syria hosting huge numbers of refugees feeling the strain of that generosity. Secondly, having the position clarified on funding levels so early in the year gives us confidence that we will be able to sustain very high level of programming throughout the year."

Needs are becoming more, not less, severe: Grandi

Echoing that message, [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), Filippo Grandi, warned that "needs are becoming more, not less severe" for Syrian refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries and the "many" Syrians returning home.

Despite these returns, Mr. Grandi suggested that it would be some time before larger numbers of people left neighbouring countries, owing to huge level of destruction to basic infrastructure inside Syria, along with ongoing insecurity and a lack of basic essentials.

The High Commissioner called for "more predictable investments" from donors to alleviate the strain on host communities in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, where governments were finding that it was "a difficult sell for them to tell their populations that they have to continue to host large numbers of Syrians".

Conflict 'not over yet': EU's Mogherini

Conference co-host Federica Mogherini, the EU's top foreign affairs official, underlined the need to show solidarity with the people of Syria and demonstrate support for a UN-led political solution. The more than eight-year conflict is "not over yet", she said.

"We want the people of Syria not to be forgotten at a moment when the international community seems to care a little bit less about this," Ms. Mogherini added. "A military situation...might be developing in one sense or another, but what is clear to anybody is that winning the peace will require a political, Syrian-owned process led by the United Nations in Geneva."

Today, 12 million Syrians are either refugees or displaced inside Syria, around half of the pre-war population.

Under the UN appeal, \$3.3 billion is required to help those displaced inside Syria, and \$5.5 billion is needed for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries.

Without continued funding, humanitarian activities "would be interrupted, cutting deliveries of life-saving food, water, health, shelter and protection", Mr. Lowcock warned.

99 per cent of intravenous drug users lack access to health, 'social services with dignity' says UNAIDS chief

Despite a decline in new HIV infections globally, a UN report launched on Wednesday highlights that nearly all people who inject drugs live in countries that do not provide suitable harm-reduction service coverage, meaning they are denied adequate access to essential health services.

"[UNAIDS](#) is greatly concerned about the lack of progress for people who inject drugs, which is due to the failure of many countries to implement evidence-informed, human rights-based approaches to drug use," said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, the UN agency dedicated to combatting the virus.

The new UNAIDS report, [Health, rights and drugs: harm reduction, decriminalization and zero discrimination for people who use drugs](#), shows that of the 10.6 million who injected drugs in 2016, more than half were living with hepatitis C and one-in-eight with HIV.

Among other things, comprehensive harm reduction services, such as needle-syringe programmes, drug dependence treatment and HIV testing and treatment would "kick-start progress on stopping new HIV infections among people who use drugs", says the report.

"By putting people at the centre and ensuring that they have access to health and social services with dignity and without discrimination or criminalization," Mr. Sidibé said, "lives can be saved and new HIV infections drastically reduced".

Few UN Member States have lived up to an agreement made at the 2016 [Special Session on the World Drug Problem](#), to establish effective measures for people who use drugs, according to the agency.

UNAIDS advocates for the full engagement of civil society as an essential source of information and advocacy, especially in places where repressive policies and practices are the norm.

The organization also promotes human rights and health services, targeting harm reduction and HIV services, community-led responses and the removal of drug- and HIV-related stigmas and discrimination.

UNAIDS recommendations:

- Implement harm reduction and HIV services, including opioid substitution therapy and overdose management.
 - Ensure that all drug users have access to prevention, testing and treatment for HIV, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted infections.
 - Decriminalize drug possession and personal use.
 - Act to eliminate all forms of stigma and discrimination experienced by people who use drugs.
 - Support civil society's full engagement as a source of information and to provide community-led services.
 - Invest in human rights programmes and health services.
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Humanity 'at a crossroads' as damage to planet poses growing risk to health, UN environment agency warns

Human activity is damaging the planet so badly, exacerbated by [climate change](#), that it will increasingly put our health at risk, warns a major report from the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)), released on Wednesday at the [UN Environment Assembly](#), currently taking place in Nairobi.

In a [statement](#), UN Environment described the [Global Environment Outlook](#), which was produced by 250 scientists and experts from more than 70 countries, as the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment completed by the United Nations in the last five years.

Unless environmental protections are drastically scaled up, the report says, there could be millions of premature deaths by the middle of this century, with pollutants in freshwater systems becoming a major cause of death by 2050.

The science is clear. The health and prosperity of humanity is directly tied with the state of our environment – *Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director, UNEP*

In addition, more chemicals, known as endocrine disruptors, will have an adverse effect on male and female fertility, as well as the neurological development of children.

The UN Environment Assembly is the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, where environmental ministers from around the world are meeting to tackle critical issues such as [food waste](#), accelerating the spread of [electric mobility](#), and the crisis of [plastic pollution](#) in the oceans.

“The science is clear. The health and prosperity of humanity are directly tied to the state of our environment,” said Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director of UNEP. “We are at a crossroads. Do we continue on our current path, which will lead to a bleak future for humankind, or pivot to sustainable development? That is the choice our political leaders must make, now.”

Change outdated business models to save the planet

On a more optimistic note, the report makes clear that the science, technology, and financing exists to move towards a more sustainable global economy, and ensure that the worst-case scenario is avoided, but political leaders, together with much of the public and private sector, is still wedded to outdated, polluting models of production and development.

Ensuring a near-zero-waste economy by 2050 will require a new global business approach, and the report shows that “green investment” of just 2 per cent of countries’ GDP would deliver long-term growth comparable with a “business as usual” approach, but with fewer impacts from climate change, water scarcity and loss of ecosystems.

As well as policy changes that address entire systems such as food and energy, the report advises the adoption of low-meat diets, and a big cut in food waste: these two measures alone would cut by half the amount of food we will need to produce in order to feed the projected 9-10 billion people on the planet in 2050.

At present, the report states, a third of global edible food is wasted, and more than half of food produced in industrialized countries is thrown away.

[Around 260,000 children in DR Congo’s Kasai region suffering severe acute malnutrition](#)

More than a quarter of a million children in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – and thousands of others who have fled with their families to nearby provinces – are suffering severe and acute malnutrition, and need lifesaving treatment, said the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on Wednesday.

Between 2016 and 2018, large numbers of people were displaced from their homes due to militia-led violence and insecurity in the Kasais, fueling rights abuses and high levels of malnutrition among children.

While pockets of insecurity still remain, thousands who had fled, have now returned to their communities: “We have been working tirelessly with partners and local communities in the Kasai region to support the slow recovery process following years of conflict and violence that have devastated children and families,” said Gianfranco Rotigliano, [UNICEF](#) Representative in the DRC.

At the same time, at least 300,000 Congolese are returning from Angola, causing additional stress on health centers, schools and other basic services in Kasai and compromising access to essential and lifesaving services for many children.

“We are concerned that recent gains for children might be lost in this fragile situation, now that we have many people returning to the region from Angola”, the UNICEF Representative pointed out.

Over the last two years, UNICEF and its partners have treated 200,000 severely malnourished children in the Kasai region and rehabilitated 500 burned-down or looted classrooms so children could return to school.

It has also assisted more than 100,000 children with psychosocial support and education material and supported more than 5,000 unaccompanied children and those associated with militias, helping to reintegrate them back into their families and communities.

Moreover, since 2017, UNICEF and its partners in Kasai have vaccinated nearly four million children against measles and yellow fever; organized access to health care for more than 163,000 people; provided 900,000 people with water, sanitation and hygiene kits in cholera-prone zones; secured access to community spaces for learning for 78,000 children; provided essential household items to nearly 150,000 people; and reached more than six million people with key life-saving messages.

[UN must provide redress for minorities placed in toxic Kosovo camps, says rights expert](#)

An independent rights expert appointed by the [Human Rights Council](#) has called on the United Nations to “provide justice and remedies” to displaced people who suffered lead poisoning after being housed in UN camps on toxic wasteland in Kosovo.

The appeal on Wednesday by Special Rapporteur on human rights and toxics, Baskut Tuncak, follows a UN panel report on alleged human rights violations

by the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, [UNMIK](#).

Among the cases reviewed by the Human Rights Advisory Panel was a complaint submitted by 138 individuals from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities that they suffered lead poisoning and other serious health consequences after their relocation to internally-displaced persons (IDP) camps in northern Kosovo, between 1999 and 2013.

Taking into account the panel's findings, the office of UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#), [announced in May 2017](#), the establishment of a Trust Fund to implement community-based assistance projects.

The statement said that the Secretary-General "believes that it is our shared duty to support the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo and ensure that they receive the assistance that they need. In this connection, the Organization will make every effort, in consultation with Member States, to mobilize the necessary resources in support of the Trust Fund.

However, to date, the Fund has not received any contributions from Member States, Mr. Tuncak maintained, adding that lead poisoning is believed to have contributed to the deaths of several children and adults.

'Fundamentally flawed' solution

"I am deeply disappointed by the inertia surrounding this case," he said, "and that the solution offered by the UN is an inoperative and fundamentally flawed Trust Fund, which will neither provide justice, nor the necessary elements of an effective remedy for the victims."

According to the Special Rapporteur, around 600 people lived in the camps - following their displacement during conflict between the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Kosovo Albanian rebels who were supported by NATO airpower – between 1999 and 2013. Approximately half were children under the age of 14.

Reports of lead poisoning among residents were available as early as 1999, Mr Tuncak said in a statement, noting that protective measures to prevent lead exposure were taken for peacekeeping personnel in 2000.

Such action was not carried out for residents until 2006, however, he said.

"After sobering discussions with victims and their families and assessing the facts of this tragic case, the circumstances demand individual compensation and a public apology by the United Nations, in addition to community-based projects," Mr Tuncak said.

"The UN's integrity is at issue," he continued. "It should reform its approach and mobilise the necessary resources to fully implement the recommendations of its own Human Rights Advisory Panel without further delay."

In addition to recommending compensation payments to 138 individuals, the panel also called for a public apology for failing to comply with human

rights standards.

“Decades ago, UNMIK did not fulfil its mandate to promote and protect the rights of these children and their families,” the Special Rapporteur said.” Nothing will replace what these victims have lost, but now the United Nations has an opportunity to do what it can to atone for past mistakes.”