

UN appalled at killing of aid workers in South Sudan

26 March 2017 – Six aid workers from a national non-governmental organization were killed when their convoy was ambushed yesterday while travelling along the Government-controlled area on the Juba-Pibor road, the United Nations mission in the country (UNMISS) has said.

Their bodies were found on the road by other members of the convoy who were some way behind.

The United Nations condemns this appalling and pointless loss of life, said the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan and the head of UNMISS, David Shearer in a news release issued by the mission.

This cold-blooded killing is utterly reprehensible, not least, because these aid workers were dedicated to alleviating the ongoing suffering of the people of South Sudan, he added, urging the Government to investigate and apprehend the killers.

The attack is the single worst incident targeting aid workers in the African country since the outbreak of hostilities in December 2013. It comes at a time when humanitarian needs have reached unprecedented levels.

[Such attacks] not only put the lives of aid workers at risk, they also threaten the lives of thousands of South Sudanese who rely on our assistance for their survival, said Eugene Owusu, the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, stressing that security of relief workers has to be ensured so that they are able to provide relief to those with immense needs across the nation.

The conflict has taken a devastating toll on the people of South Sudan: around 7.5 million people are in need of relief and protection, and the humanitarian crisis has deepened further with localized famine declared in parts of the country.

No safety when attacks met with silence

At least 79 aid workers have been killed in South Sudan since December 2013, including at least 12 this year. The last two months alone have seen a sharp increase of attacks on humanitarians and looting of supplies intended for people suffering from the famine.

On 14 March, one health worker and a patient were killed in an attack on a humanitarian convoy that was responding to a cholera outbreak in Yirol East (in the central part of South Sudan). Earlier, on 10 March, staff of an international non-governmental organization were detained by non-state armed individuals during fighting in Mayendit town (also in central South Sudan).

They were released four days later.

“Every time an attack of this nature happens, we say that it must never happen again. And yet it does [...] there is no safety when attacks are met with silence and inaction,” said the Humanitarian Coordinator, underscoring that the impunity that has prevailed for such crimes must end, and that perpetrators must be brought to justice.

“I implore all those in positions of power to step up to their responsibilities and stop this, as they are ultimately accountable for what happens under their watch.”

On International Day, UN chief Guterres calls on all to stand in solidarity with detained staff

25 March 2017 – On the International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted the challenges that UN staff face and urged everyone to ensure that they have the safety they need to help those most in need around the globe.

“We are still awaiting news of the fate of two members of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a sanctions-monitoring body established by the Security Council,” said Mr. Guterres in a message.

“We are doing everything possible to find and help them.”

Michael Sharp and Zaida Catalan, of the Group of Experts, went missing in the Kasai Central region in the DRC on 12 March along with four Congolese nationals.

Noting that the latest case highlighted the perils that UN staff and partners often face while serving the world’s people, the UN chief said that last year, seven UN staff were abducted by non-state actors and four were kept as hostages.

“Fortunately, all were ultimately released safely,” he said, but added that more than 20 UN civilian personnel remain in detention, of whom, six are being held without the UN having received any explanation for their arrest.

“The Department of Safety and Security and I continue to monitor all of these cases and seek the immediate release of our colleagues,” he added.

Mr. Guterres also noted that only 92 UN Member States are party to the 1994

Convention on the Safety of UN and Associated Personnel, and that only 30 have ratified the 2005 Optional Protocol, which extends protection to UN personnel delivering humanitarian, political or development assistance.

Urging all countries that have not joined these instruments to do so without delay, the UN chief called on everyone to stand in solidarity with all detained staff and to pledge to work together to ensure that all UN staff have the safety they need to help the world's most vulnerable.

The International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members is marked each year on 25 March, the date of the abduction of Alec Collett, who was taken by armed gunmen in 1985 while working for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). His remains were finally found in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in 2009.

Hoping to build with 'incremental, constructive steps' – UN envoy for Syria

25 March 2017 – Speaking to the media in Geneva yesterday, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria said that he is not expecting miracles, breakthroughs or breakdowns but is hoping to build on the previous rounds of talks on the war-ravaged country with some incremental, constructive steps.

"All invitees and delegations who were present here [...] are feeling that it was worth it to come and all came. None of them has threatened to leave [...] which is a sign of maturity and of responsibility particularly in difficult moments like this one," said UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura at a media stakeout at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG), yesterday.

Underscoring the importance attached to the fifth round of the talks, Mr. de Mistura added that he has been particularly attentive, trying to engage with and having support from all the regional players, interlocutors and stakeholders.

He further mentioned that the discussions that took place earlier in Riyadh (capital of Saudi Arabia), Moscow (Russia) and Ankara (Turkey) conveyed a strong feeling of the need to build on the fourth round of the Geneva talks, which took place from 23 February to 3 March.

"Hence, our expectation and the stronger suggestion to the guarantors of the Astana process that they do retake the situation in hand and that hopefully there will be new Astana meeting as soon as possible in order to control the situation which at the moment is worrisome," added the UN Special Envoy.

He also informed the media that the meeting yesterday focused into substance and that the agenda had been established and strongly supported by the Security Council.

Mr. De Mistura further noted that given the importance of the current round of intra-Syrian talks and in view of the tensions within the country, he would be travelling to Syria to meet with members of the Arab League as well as bilateral meetings on the situation.

“Meanwhile the talks will continue under the chairmanship of Ambassador Ramzy [Ezzeldin Ramzy, the Deputy Special Envoy for Syria,] but I felt it was important to engage as many regional players as possible and they all happen to be in one room,” said the UN Special Envoy.

UN envoy calls for urgent measures to protect ceasefire in Syria

25 March 2017 – Voicing deep concern over recent escalation of fighting in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy for the country has urged Iran, Russia and Turkey to undertake urgent efforts to uphold the ceasefire which has been in effect since late December last year.

“Growing violations in recent days are undermining the ceasefire regime addressed through the Astana meetings, with significant negative consequences for the safety of Syrian civilians, humanitarian access and the momentum of the political process,” said UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

According to a note to correspondents issued today, Mr. de Mistura sent letters to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran – as the three guarantor-States of the ceasefire – to undertake urgent efforts to uphold it.

These appeals were also brought to the attention of Russia and the United States as the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the note added.

The ceasefire came into effect on 30 December last year, but recent fighting in capital Damascus, Hama and elsewhere in Syria have put it under strain.

Also in the note, Mr. de Mistura noted that joint efforts of Iran, Russia and Turkey to guarantee the ceasefire “are indispensable for improving the conditions on the ground and contributing to an environment conducive for a productive political progress”.

International efforts towards Middle East peace must be matched by steps on the ground – UN envoy

24 March 2017 – Noting that international engagement on reviving the Middle East peace process over the last three months reconfirmed the consensus that the two-state solution is the only means of realizing the national aspirations of both peoples a senior United Nations official called for continued expansion of the momentum into a concrete vision to end the wider conflict.

“Shaping a credible political horizon through reviving engagement between the parties with intensified international and regional support is essential to advancing this goal,” Nickolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, told the Security Council today.

In his briefing, the Mr. Mladenov highlighted that the recent increase in rockets fires from Gaza towards Israel was a worrying development and said that such potentially lethal provocations are unnecessary, dangerous and risk devastating escalation.

At the same, he also called on Israel to do more to improve the daily lives of the Palestinians and said that introduction of polices that increase Palestinian civil authority, support Palestinian development and preserve the prospect of a two-state solution, in line with the recommendations of the Middle East Quartet, remained essential.

He also spoke of the general situation over the past few months as well as detailed specific instances that had the potential to escalate the situation.

There had been a marked increase in statements, announcements and decisions related to construction and expansion, he continued.

Israel made two major announcements for a total of 5,500 housing units in settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank, he said. Within three weeks, some 3,000 housing units had advanced through the planning process and more than 240 units had reached the final approval stage. Eighty per cent of the 4,000 settlement moves in the last three months were concentrated in and around major Israeli population centres close to the 1967 line, while some 20 per cent were in outlying locations deep inside the occupied West Bank.

“While the [Security Council] called upon both parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, such actions continued during the reporting period,” he noted.

Turning to tangible actions that can help progress the peace process, the UN Special Coordinator underlined that it is essential that international efforts are accompanied by significant steps taken on the ground by the

parties, to create an environment conducive to peace.

“The United Nations will continue to call on and work with the parties and all interested stakeholders to find a just, sustainable and comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions,” he concluded.