

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”.

PHOTO FEATURE: The enduring legacy of the transatlantic slave trade

24 March 2017 – The transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in history and undeniably one of the most inhumane. According to the United Nations, over a 400-year period, the forcible extraction of Africans from their motherland was unprecedented in the annals of recorded human history

In 2007, the General Assembly declared 25 March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, to be observed annually.

The Day offers an opportunity to honour those who suffered at the hands of the brutal slavery system. It also aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today.



: Annual Global Student Video Conference Commemorating Victims of Slavery.
Photo: UN Photo/Manuel Elias

This year the theme “Remember Slavery: Recognising the Legacy and Contributions of People of African Descent” recognises the horrors of the slave trade, while acknowledging that it led to an unprecedented transfer of knowledge and culture from Africa to the Americas, Europe and elsewhere.

Enslaved Africans brought with them advanced techniques of farming, working metals such as gold and iron, and boat building, among others. Those skills need to be remembered and celebrated.

“This is a story that has shaped almost every culture of the world,” Dr. Lonnie G. Bunch III, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture told UN News.

Visitor’s take in “A Legacy of Black Achievement,” an exhibit at the UN featuring 21 figures who have personified the vital contributions that Africans and their descendants have made globally – from science and technology to political activism and the arts. Photo: UN News/ Elizabeth Scaffidi

This commemoration also acknowledges the enduring contributions of the vibrant African diaspora, which continue to enrich cultures across the globe.

Through music, dance, spirituality, sport, literature, art and cuisine, the diaspora has enabled societies to advance in science, technology, business, politics, law, social justice and international diplomacy, to name just a few.

The theme for this year’s International Day appropriately invites us to appreciate and honour the diaspora’s tremendous achievements.

Looking back to move forward

According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, was the largest trading centre of slaves from the African coast.



The island of Gorée lies off the coast of Senegal, opposite Dakar. Photo: UNESCO/Richard Veillon

On the Island of Gorée, the architecture of the House of Slaves and its Door of No Return is characterized by the contrast between the dark slave quarters and the elegant houses of the slave traders. In 1962, it became a museum to memorialize the final exit point of the slaves from Africa. Today, the island is a symbol of human exploitation and a sanctuary for reconciliation.



‘The Ark of Return’ honours the memories of the estimated 15 million men, women and children who were victims of the forced extraction. Photo: UN News/UN/Elizabeth Scaffidi

FEATURE: Cuba’s rich musical heritage rooted in African rhythm

24 March 2017 – For over 400 years, more than 15 million men, women and children were the victims of the tragic transatlantic slave trade – one of the darkest chapters in human history – commemorated by the United Nations every year on 25 March, the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Besides honouring and remembering those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, and to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today, the day is also an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of the enslaved people to the societies in which they found themselves during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, with valuable skills and useful knowledge that they brought with them.

Among them, were the rhythms and musical traditions from their homeland, which, according to historical experts attending an African Diaspora musical event at the UN on 14 April 2016, were essential to their survival and maintaining their identity.

As one travels through the African Diaspora, music and dance considered to be indigenous, is largely reminiscent of the African continent, as one may discover on a visit to countries like Cuba.

VIDEO: When Africans were brought centuries ago to Cuba to work on the sugar plantations, they also brought their cultural traditions including their music and instruments. When they arrived on the island, they embraced the tempo of the indigenous population and mixed it with their own African beat. Now young people are keeping the music of the enslaved alive in their own creations. *Credit: UNDP LAC*

Here, Joon Park, UNTV videographer and editor, gives his unique first person

account of what it was like to report the story of Afro-Cuban music during a time of national mourning.

“Viva Fidel!” A middle aged man proudly shouted at our backs as we walked away after asking for directions. UNTV Producer, Mary Ferreira, and I were in Havana, Cuba, but it wasn’t just any ordinary day in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean Island nation. It was the day after Cuba lost its revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro and the city had come to a screeching halt.



The streets were filled with people weeping, paying tribute, and flaunting Fidel’s photo everywhere. The air was heavy with grief and uncertainty – sometimes almost too silent as a nine-day period of national mourning began. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

As part of the United Nations’ Decade for People of African Descent campaign, we were in Cuba to document the influence that enslaved Africans and their descendants have on the island nation’s iconic music.

Experts estimate that more than 1.3 million slaves were brought to Cuba from across different regions of Africa. Their culture and religion, which are still present everywhere in the country, left a deep imprint on the island. To honor and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, the United Nations designated 25, March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The day aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice.



Images of the late Fidel Casto are projected on a building surrounding Revolution Square in Havana during the nine day period of mourning after his death on 25, November, 2016. Photo: UNTV/ Joon Park

Like any other filming assignment, we knew to expect the unexpected – but this was different. The news of Castro’s death broke shortly before we boarded our flight and the number of international journalists at the airport indicated the weight of the historic news.

The quick turn of events posed a major obstacle for our production schedule. The Cuban government placed a ban on public entertainment during the mourning period which meant no live music playing throughout the nation for nine days.

Ferreira, my seasoned producer, swiftly changed course and pushed back filming of musicians to the following week and after much struggle and anxious waiting, we met an intriguing musician named, Ramon Garcia. He led an Afro-Cuban band called “Vocal Baobob.”



Ramon Garcia’s front porch becomes a stage for neighbours to play their Afro-

Cuban music. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

He openly gave us an invitation to his home where his band members regularly met and practiced. The ban was finally lifted and on the way to Mr. Garcia's house our driver, Mondí, cranked up the volume on his car stereo.

"I try to connect it with Africa," Mr. Garcia said. "There is no way that I would compose a song without a little bit of African rhythm."

Within minutes his friends started to arrive; one with drumsticks in his pocket, the other with the African shekere (a West African percussion instrument made of dried gourd with beads woven into a net). Among them was Garcia's cousin, Blanco, a contemporary hip hop rapper.

Blanco presented his latest work and Mr. Garcia quickly pulled out the batá drums. The batá drums are known as the sacred drums of Cuba, which were only played for the kings and for religious rituals in Africa.



Mr. Garcia plays the batá drums while his cousin, Blanco (right), raps his new song. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

The front porch now became a stage as I readied my camera. The modern hip hop beat blasted out from the speakers. Slowly and naturally, like laying bricks, Mr. Garcia added the batá drum rhythm, another added the African shekere while the others started humming.

The all too familiar sound of contemporary hip hop was transformed into a mixture of African and Cuban melodies. And the first phrase of the song went, "Gracias Fidel!"