

Deteriorating security situation in DR Congo 'a source of major concern,' warns UN envoy

21 March 2017 – The United Nations envoy for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) today stressed the need for both the Government and the opposition groups there to show the same level of commitment and compromise which led to the signing on 31 December of an agreement on the electoral process, while also citing the UN peacekeeping mission's readiness to adapt to the deteriorating security situation.

The primary responsibility for the implementation of the Agreement rests with its signatories, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for DRC, Maman Sidikou, told the Security Council in a briefing.

Under the agreement, President Joseph Kabilo would stay in office until elections are held by the end of 2017. During this period, a 'National Council for Overseeing the Electoral Agreement and Process (CNSAP)' would be set up, and a new prime minister named from opposition ranks.

However, some discord has delayed the implementation of the agreement, and the death of opposition leader Étienne Tshisekedi, who was to head the CNSAP, had had a significant impact on the political process.

Mr. Sidikou said that the situation seems to have evolved in the right direction over the last few days, with negotiations on the "Special Arrangement" resuming, and the Presidents of the two Houses of Parliament called for an irreversible and credible electoral process and expressed their support.

Significant progress has been made in updating the electoral roll. To date, more than 19 million voters have been enrolled and the enrollment process is about to begin in the two remaining enrollment areas, said Mr. Sidikou, who is also the head of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

MONUSCO's logistical and technical support for the enrollment process will be completed by the end of this month, and if authorized by the Security Council, MONUSCO is prepared to provide technical and logistical support for the electoral process, which would go beyond updating the electoral roll.

VIDEO: Concerns over deteriorating security in the DRC in briefing to the Security Council

On the security front, Mr. Sidikou said that violence and threats to civilians are no longer concentrated in the eastern DRC, noting that

community-based violence and inter-ethnic clashes have spread from areas already affected by armed conflict, such as the Kivus, to Tanganyika, the three Kasai provinces, Lomami and Kongo Central.

The Secretary-General has set out a package of measures aimed at enhancing the ability of the MONUSCO Force to support the achievement of the Mission's strategic objectives in the current challenging security context through the adoption of a more mobile, flexible and agile posture. He has recommended the deployment of two additional formed police units (FPUs) to help the Congolese authorities address the potential threat of electoral and politically motivated violence in key urban centers where there is no FPU presence.

Mr. Sidikou said that MONUSCO has already undertaken adjustments to its posture and operations, and that the Mission will continue to make such adjustments as may be required in the months ahead.

MONUSCO will continue to provide support for the implementation of the Agreement, while supporting efforts to address the mounting threats faced by the civilian population during the transition period, he concluded.

UN disability rights committee opens with a call to spotlight gender issues

20 March 2017 – The United Nations committee monitoring efforts to protect rights of persons with disabilities today opened its spring session today in Geneva with a call to pay special attention to gender issues.

“We do urge you to ensure a strong gender basis is built in to your agenda this year, and we urge you to take special care to ensure that the voice and experience of girls and women resonates within your deliberations,” the UN’s Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore told the 17th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which runs 12 April.

Ms. Gilmore spoke on behalf of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who has made gender parity and the equal representation of women a centrepiece of his term in office.

In this session, the Committee, consisting of 18 international independent experts, will review the rights of people with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova, Iran, Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jordan, Armenia, Honduras and Canada.

These countries are among the 172 State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted on 13 December 2006 by the General Assembly.

Rather than considering disability as an issue of medicine, charity or dependency, the CRPD challenges people worldwide to understand disability as a human rights issue.

It covers many areas where obstacles can arise, such as physical access to buildings, roads and transportation, and access to information through written and electronic communications while it also aims to reduce stigma and discrimination, which are often reasons why people with disabilities are excluded from education, employment and health and other services.

RELATED: FEATURE: Visually impaired professor to light way forward on UN disability agenda

There are around one billion people with disabilities in the world.

At today's meeting, the Committee adopted its agenda and programme of work while newly elected members of the Committee were sworn in.

The fact that only one woman has been elected by Member States to serve on the Committee is "fundamentally not appropriate," Ms. Gilmore said, urging Member States to "rectify this unacceptable situation" at the next elections.

Ahead of International Day, UN rights chief urges governments to target hate speech, crimes

20 March 2017 – On the eve of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the United Nations human rights chief today reminded Governments around the world that they have a legal obligation to stop hate speech and hate crimes, and called on people everywhere to "stand up for someone's rights."

"Politics of division and the rhetoric of intolerance are targeting racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and migrants and refugees. Words of fear and loathing can, and do, have real consequences," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said.

The "Words of fear and loathing can, and do, have real consequences" UN High Commissioner's statement comes ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, marked annually on 21 March. The theme for this year is ending racial profiling and incitement to hatred, including as it relates to people's attitudes and actions towards migration.

At the Summit for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016, UN Member States adopted a Declaration strongly condemning acts and manifestations of racism,

racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The Summit also sparked the UN's Together initiative to change negative perceptions and attitudes aimed at refugees and migrants.

In his statement, Mr. Zeid said that States do not have any excuse to allow racism and xenophobia to fester.

States "have the legal obligation to prohibit and eliminate racial discrimination, to guarantee the right of everyone, no matter their race, colour, national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law," the senior UN official said.

He urged Governments to adopt legislation expressly prohibiting racist hate speech, including the dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination, and threats or incitement to violence.

"It is not an attack on free speech or the silencing of controversial ideas or criticism, but a recognition that the right to freedom of expression carries with it special duties and responsibilities," Mr. Zeid said.

To promote human rights, the UN High Commissioner's office, known by its acronym OHCHR, is asking people around the world to , "Stand up for Someone's Rights Today". The campaign urges people to take practical steps in their own communities to take a stand for humanity.

UN aid 'pushed to limits' as 320,000 more civilians may flee west Mosul

20 March 2017 – Humanitarian agencies are bracing for the possibility that in coming weeks about 300,000 to 320,000 civilians may flee the western districts of Iraqi's Mosul city where Government forces are fighting to oust the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorists, a senior United Nations aid official in the country has said.

That is in addition to some 180,000 civilians who have already fled the fighting in western Mosul since mid-February.

“The humanitarian operation in western Mosul is far larger and far more complex than in the east” said the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Lise Grande, in a news release issued yesterday by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The main difference, she explained, is that tens of thousands of families stayed in their homes in the east, but in the west, tens of thousands are

fleeing.

“We've been planning and preparing for the Mosul operation for months. But the truth is that the crisis is pushing all of us to our limits. We're going to be doing the best we can to ensure the people who need assistance receive it.” said Ms. Grande.

Humanitarian agencies are deeply worried that civilians are at grave risk in western Mosul. The use of explosives in the densely populated Old City is likely to cause extensive damage, and people fleeing are telling humanitarian workers that it's very difficult to enter or leave the Old City, said Ms. Grande.

“Families are at risk of being shot if they leave and they are at risk if they stay. It's horrible. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are trapped and they are in terrible danger,” she said.

RELATED: Relief operations in western Mosul reaching 'breaking point'

The main supply route into western Mosul has been cut since mid-November. Families fleeing the city are reporting that shelves are empty and that the only food available is what they already have at home. Water and electricity supplies have been cut and medicines are running out.

Under the leadership of the Government of Iraq, a massive national effort is underway to address the crisis. Civilians fleeing the western districts in the city are being accommodated in 17 camps and emergency sites near the city. The Government and partners are rushing to construct and expand 10 of these.

“Every day, more space is becoming available,” said Ms. Grande. “It's a race against time. So far, families are receiving support and being sheltered. But if the number of people leaving the city increases faster than we can construct new plots, the situation could deteriorate very quickly.”

Since 17 October, over 330,000 people have been displaced by the Mosul crisis, over 70,000 of whom have returned to their homes. Humanitarian agencies have been working around the clock to provide life-saving support to more than 1.3 million people from eastern and western Mosul including families who have stayed in their homes, and those who have fled.

Ahead of International Day, UN and Smurfs team up to promote happiness

and sustainable development

18 March 2017 – Every person – no matter how big, small or blue – can make the world more peaceful, equitable and healthy, the United Nations today told young people at a special ceremony for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that included the Smurfs and a handover of the key to Smurfdom.

Voice actors from the upcoming animated movie *Smurfs: The Lost Village* joined 1,500 students from the international Model UN conference to celebrate the upcoming International Day of Happiness, which focuses on personal well-being, and the SDGs, which include decent work for all, education and health services.

In a special blue carpet presentation, the United States stars of the movie Demi Lovato, who voices Smurfette, Joe Manganiello who is Hefty and Mandy Patinkin or Papa Smurf honoured three young students promoting the SDGs in their communities with a symbolic key to the Smurfs Village in recognition of their work.

On behalf of all Smurfdom, thank you for your work in awakening everything, in your community, through social media, all over the world, in the ways that you have chosen to encourage people everywhere to make this world a better place for those who are so vulnerable in every way imaginable, Mr. Patinkin told Karen Jerath, Sarina Divan and Noor Samee.

VIDEO International Day of Happiness 2017 – Small Smurfs Big Goals

Ms. Jerath, who is 20 years old, invented a containment device that could prevent offshore oil spills and ensure the protection of marine life. She was joined by Ms. Divan, 17, who expanded a UN Foundation girl empowerment initiative at her high school and beyond, and Mr. Samee, also 17, a UNICEF blogger and advocate on social justice issues.

Given a giant key with the SDG multi-coloured logo by UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Cristina Gallach, the students were told the world needs you to continue.

Never be afraid to speak up and to make this world a wonderful, beautiful, hopeful, optimistic place full of freedom, joy, justice and dignity, good food, good water, good opportunities for people everywhere, forever, said Mr. Patinkin.

The Small Smurfs Big Goals campaign was created to encourage people to visit SmallSmurfsBigGoals.com to find out how to contribute to achieving the SDGs, and to share information, ideas and images on social media.

As part of today's festivities, the UN Postal Administration unveiled a

special edition stamp sheet featuring the Small Smurfs Big Goals campaign.

The stamps, which feature images of the Smurfs and the SDG logos, were presented by UN Assistant Secretary-General for Management, Stephen Cutts, and the Belgian Ambassador to the United Nations, Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve.

The event, held at the UN General Assembly in New York, was organized by the UN, UNICEF and UN Foundation, ahead of the International Day of Happiness marked annually on 20 March.

In 2015, the UN launched 17 SDGs that seek to end poverty, reduce inequality, and protect our planet — three key aspects that lead to well-being and happiness.

Along with New York, celebrations were held around the world to mark the campaign and the SDGs.

On Monday, the film cast along with the UN, UNICEF and UN Foundation will be at the Empire State Building to turn the iconic tower blue in honour of the International Day of Happiness and the Small Smurfs Big Goals campaign.