

Burundi: Measures being used to 'criminalize' work of human rights defenders, warn UN experts

6 February 2017 – Speaking out against a ban and provisional suspension of a number of civil society organizations in Burundi, United Nations rights experts warned today of growing repression of human rights defenders and groups amid the already difficult environment in which they.

Also worrying, according to a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) were two bills adopted by the National Assembly of Burundi last December that require local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to obtain authorization from the Minister of the Interior for any activity and that the work of foreign NGOs must comply with priorities set by the Government.

“These moves are just the latest in a series of attacks on the rights to freedom of expression and association in Burundi,” said the rights experts.

“Disturbingly, these measures take particular aim at human rights defenders and independent civil society, and are being used to unduly obstruct and criminalize their work on broad and often fallacious grounds.”

Authorities in Burundi banned five civil society organizations in October 2016. In December 2016, they also barred two other groups, one of which was working for good governance and the fight against corruption. Additionally, four other organizations have also been provisionally suspended.



Relatives of a student killed in the Jabe neighbourhood of Bujumbura, mourn at home in the Burundian capital. Photo: Phil Moore/IRIN

Also in the release, the experts reiterated the “unanimous” strong stance of various bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council – the inter-governmental body responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the world – on allegations of serious human rights violations in Burundi, the experts called on the Governmental to “an end to the climate of impunity currently prevailing in the country” and to cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi and with OHCHR in a positive and collaborative manner, as an essential step towards ending the major crisis facing the country.

“It is crucial that the State promotes and protects the rights to freedom of expression and association enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Burundi is a State party,” they said.

“All individuals, including human rights defenders, have the right to express

themselves and associate freely, without fear of threats, intimidation, violence, arbitrary detention or enforced or disappearance,” the experts added.

The human rights experts voicing their concern included:

Independent experts and Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

[PHOTO FEATURE: International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation](#)

6 February 2017 – While the exact number is unknown, at least 200 million girls and women in 30 countries throughout Africa, the Middle East and Asia have been subjected to female genital mutilation, or FGM, according to the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The World Health Organization (WHO) calls FGM a procedure that intentionally alters or causes injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons. In lay terms, babies, girls and women are cut and their genitalia severed. WHO underscores that it not only provides no health benefits, but may lead to a life-time of obstacles. Furthermore, the majority of females who have been subjected to the practice are between infancy and age 15.

No medical reason



A young woman in an Ouagadougou clinic in Burkina Faso has undergone reconstructive surgery to repair the damage caused by female genital mutilation at age 6. Photo: UNICEF/ Nesbitt

Female genital mutilation is recognized internationally as a violation of human rights of girls and women.

According to WHO, female genital mutilation has no health benefits, and it harms girls and women in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy, normal female genital tissue – interfering with their natural body functions.



In Mali, Fanta talks about the health complications she continues to experience as a result of female genital mutilation. While renounced in Sébétou Village in 2009, an estimated 85 per cent of Malian girls and women aged 15 to 49 have been subjected to FGM. Photo: UNICEF/ Asselin

It consists of all procedures that alter or injure female genitalia for non-medical reasons.

WHO also notes that the procedure has both short- and long-term consequences that range from severe bleeding and painful urination, to menstrual and psychological problems, cysts and infections. Sexual issues frequently ensue, childbirth complications arise and the risk of new born deaths increase. Subsequently, further surgeries are needed.

A dangerous tradition



Displaced women and men in Chad celebrate 'circumcision' days for girls by dancing together. During that time, several 11-years-olds were mutilated. Photo: UNHCR/ Hélène Caux

Female genital mutilation also violates women's rights to health, security and physical integrity, along with the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The UN notes that the practice reflects a deeply-rooted inequality between the sexes, constituting an extreme form of discrimination against women and girls.

Reasons behind female genital mutilations vary from one region to another, as well as over time. They include a mix of sociocultural factors within families and communities.



In Ethiopia, 6-year-old Asmah was forced to undergo female genital mutilation procedure. Her mother Bedria believes that Asmah could not marry honourably without it, saying, "From our own experience we know that [cutting] causes problems. However because it is the tradition, we continue to do it." Photo: UNICEF/ Getachew

Female genital mutilation is associated with misconceived cultural ideals of femininity and modesty, which include the notion that girls are beautiful after removal of body parts that are considered unclean, unfeminine or male. It is often seen as a necessary part of raising a girl – a way to prepare her for adulthood and increase her chances of marriage.



In Senegal, a village imam, Mamadou Dia, sits with other village men in a

meeting – also attended by women – explaining why their village, Tatin Bambara, still practises FGM. Photo: UNICEF/ Grossman

Studies show that where female genital mutilation is a social norm, pressure to conform, along with the fear of being rejected by the community, are strong motivations to perpetuate the practice. In some communities, FGM is almost universally performed without question.

According to UNICEF, the hazardous practice has even infringed on girls' right to life – when it has resulted in their deaths as a result of shock, haemorrhage or septicaemia.

Taking a stance



In Kenya, Habiba refuses to subject her two youngest daughters – 7-year old Fathi, in white, and sister Kowsar – to female genital mutilation, fearing irreversible, life-long health complications, including psychological harm. Photo: UNICEF/ Christine Nesbitt

According to WHO, since 1997, great efforts have been made to counteract female genital mutilation, through research, work within communities, and changes in public policy.

Part of eradicating the practice is to find alternative occupations for FGM practitioners, such as being traditional birth attendants or teachers, and also cultivating situations in which men no longer wish to marry circumcised women.



Women from Samburu, Kenya, say no to female genital mutilation in public discussion gatherings. Photo: UNICEF/ Samuel Leadismo

Many target groups have been identified in the FGM elimination effort, including men, women, male youth, young girls and older women. It is important to reduce both the supply and demand for female genital mutilation.

Efforts should emphasize societal dialogue and community empowerment to collectively end the practice.



A former cutter in Uganda recommits to supporting the abandonment of female genital mutilation by appending her thumb print on a memorial during a cultural celebration event. Photo: UNICEF/ Nakibuuka

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) says “collective abandonment” – or when a whole community chooses to no longer engage in female genital mutilation – is

an effective way to end the practice. It ensures that no single girl or family will be disadvantaged by the decision.

UNFPA says the decision to collectively abandon FGM requires a process in which communities are educated about the practice and that health and human rights aspects are prominently feature. Local and grassroots organizations should play an important role in the process.

Ending FGM once and for all



Girls in Côte d'Ivoire attend a communal meeting organized by the NGO OIS Afrique, a UNICEF partner working with communities and female genital mutilation practitioners to end the harmful traditional practice. Photo: United Nations

Ten UN agencies published a statement highlighting that having gained more knowledge on the practice itself, the reasons for its continuation and interventions that can more lead to its abandonment, a common, coordinated approach could lead to female genital mutilation being abandoned within a generation.

WHO underscored that according to research, if practicing communities themselves decide to eliminate female genital mutilation, the practice can be eliminated very rapidly.



At a community meeting in Kabele Village, Ethiopia, former FGM practitioner Boko Mohammed holds the tool she used to use while performing the procedure. Photo: UNICEF/ Holt

The elimination of female genital mutilation has been called for by numerous inter-governmental organizations, including the African Union, the European Union and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, as well as in three resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly.

UNFPA estimates the need to invest about \$980 million to significantly impact FGM between 2018 and 2030.

United Nations steps-up action



Women attend an female genital mutilation sensitization session in Bamako, Mali. The session was run by UNICEF partner and local non-governmental organization (NGO) Sini Sanuma. Photo: UNICEF/ Bindra

Within the context of the UN, eliminating female genital mutilation is not a question of imposing external values on any particular country. UN

resolutions in 2012, 2014 and 2016 on banning FGM, which include a target for its elimination in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), indicate strong political will from the international community to stem the dangerous practice.

The global SDG compact, adopted in 2015 by 193 Member States, calls for an end to FGM by 2030. Goal 5 on gender equality has a specific target to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.



In an Ethiopian health care centre, Amin Aleba, said, “My wife and I made the joint decision not to have [9-year-old Medina] cut because of information that we gathered from the community meetings held in our village by Rohi-Weddu... I now understand that it is better for the health of our daughters that they remain whole.” Photo: UNICEF/ Holt

Focusing on 17 countries, UNFPA and UNICEF together lead the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of female genital mutilation.

Entitled ‘Accelerating Change,’ the programme aims to protect women and girls from FGM through participatory, culturally-sensitive and human rights-based approaches. It also cares for survivors.

Working with governments, grass-roots partners and civil society – including religious and community leaders – Accelerating Change sets goals across legal and policy reform; services for prevention, protection and care; and collective actions in the social sphere.



Two girls in Senegal clap hands at an event celebrating the abandonment of female genital mutilation by several nearby villages. Photo: UNICEF/ Furrer

[UN renews call for protection of Afghan civilians, after casualty figures spike in 2016](#)

6 February 2017 – Attacks in Afghanistan by the Taliban, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh) and pro-Government troops killed or injured more children and other civilians in 2016 than at any other time since the United Nations began keeping records, it was announced today.

According to the new UN report, some 11,418 civilian casualties were

confirmed last year – including 2,589 children – an increase of 24 per cent since the previous high in 2015.

Releasing the casualty figures at a press conference in the Afghan capital of Kabul, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Tadamichi Yamamoto, called the killing and maiming of thousands of Afghan civilians “deeply harrowing and largely preventable.”

“All parties to the conflict must take immediate concrete measures to protect the ordinary Afghan men, women and children whose lives are being shattered,” said Mr. Yamamoto, who is also the head of the UN Assistance Mission in the country (UNAMA).

A breakdown of the figures shows that 3,498 people were killed, among them 923 children, and 7,920 civilians were injured, including 2,589 children.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, said the casualty figures painted a picture of the most vulnerable sectors of society paying the highest price.



Source: UNAMA Annual Report 2016 Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

“Children have been killed, blinded, crippled – or inadvertently caused the death of their friends – while playing with unexploded ordnance that is negligently left behind by parties to the conflict,” Mr. Zeid said. His Office, known by the acronym OHCHR, works annually with UNAMA to produce the report.

In addition to figures, the report includes excerpt of interviews with survivors of violence.

One of the interviews is with a mother who survived a mortar attack during a ground engagement in the Bala Buluk district of Farah province, in the western part of Afghanistan.



Aftermath of an explosion in the centre of Kabul, Afghanistan, on the corner of Passport Lane and the Indian Embassy. Photo: UNAMA/Jawad Jalali (file)

“It was the day before Ramadan when a number of Taliban entered my village,” she told UNAMA during a telephone interview in June 2016. “While we were walking to my husband’s tricycle, a mortar shell landed nearby. My mother-in-law and I hit the ground injured and my newborn baby was hit by shrapnel in the chest. He died after a few minutes.”

UN investigators found that anti-Government forces, mainly the Taliban, were responsible for almost two-thirds of the casualties, while pro-Government forces were responsible for almost one-quarter. In addition, casualties caused by airstrikes carried out by Afghan and international forces nearly

doubled since 2015.

AUDIO: Civilian casualties in Afghanistan reached record levels last year, according to the UN Mission there, UNAMA. *Credit: UN News*

[UN urges renewed fight to end female genital mutilation as populations grow in countries where practice occurs](#)

6 February 2017 – Female genital mutilation denies women and girls their dignity and causes needless pain and suffering, with consequences that endure for a lifetime and can even be fatal, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has said, stressing that the UN Sustainable Development Agenda promises an end to this practice by 2030.

On this Day of Zero Tolerance, let us build on positive momentum and commit to intensifying global action against this heinous human rights violation for the sake of all affected women and girls, their communities and our common future, the Secretary-General said in a message on the International Day, marked annually on 6 February to strengthen momentum towards ending the practice of female genital mutilation, globally recognized as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

Despite a significant overall decline in the prevalence of the practice, widely referred to by the acronym FGM, the United Nations warns that this progress is likely to be offset as the population grows in countries where female genital mutilation is practiced, and without beefed up efforts to eliminate it, more girls will be cut.

In a blog post on the occasion of the International, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women, wrote: “The cutting and sewing of a young child’s private parts so that she is substantially damaged for the rest of her life, has no sensation during sex except probably pain, and may well face further damage when she gives birth, is to many an obvious and horrifying violation of that child’s rights.”

“It is a kind of control that lasts a lifetime,” she continued. “It makes a mockery of the idea of any part being truly private and underlines the institutionalized way in which decisions over her own body have been taken from that girl – one of some 200 million currently.”

The main reason that FGM continues – as it does in some 30 countries across three continents – is out of a desire for social acceptance and

to avoid social stigma, according to a 2016 report by the Secretary-General .

The hidden nature of the support for ending the practice slows down the process of abandonment, the authors wrote.

World must speed up progress to end female genital mutilation by 2030

Underlining that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 and now heading their second year of implementation, recognized the close connection between FGM, gender inequality, and development and reignited global action to end the practice by 2030, heads of UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN Population Fund (UNFPA) called for faster action to achieve this commitment.

It means creating greater access to support services for those at risk of undergoing FGM and those who have survived it, said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake and UNFPA Executive Director Babatunde Osotimehin in a joint statement.

It also means driving greater demand for those services, providing families and communities with information about the harm FGM causes and the benefits to be gained by ending it, they added.

Calling on governments to enact and enforce laws and policies that protect the rights of girls and women and prevent FGM, they urged everyone to make this the generation that abolishes FGM once and for all and in doing so, helps create a healthier, better world for all.

UNFPA, jointly with UNICEF, leads the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM. The programme currently focuses on 17 African countries and also supports regional and global initiatives.

The theme of the 2017 edition of the International Day is: 'Building a solid and interactive bridge between Africa and the world to accelerate ending FGM by 2030.'

Colombia: Bringing a hidden practice to light

In Colombia, for example, some members of the Emberá, a historically impoverished and marginalized indigenous group, continue the practice.

The practice is done quietly, so there are few reliable statistics. The Colombian National Indigenous Organization (ONIC) estimates that two out of three Emberá women have been cut, according to information used by the UNFPA.

But in 2007, after two girls died from infections caused by FGM, some women tribal members began being more vocal about the practice.

In the beginning, it was really difficult, Solani Zapata told UNFPA. Nobody wanted to talk about the subject.

Slowly people began to open up, leading to conversations about related issues, including gender-based violence.

Girls who undergo the practice are less likely to finish school, have limited formal employment prospects and are more likely to be married to an older man and become pregnant early in life.

The practice has since been abandoned in many communities.

“We don’t do it here anymore,” said Amanda Guasiruma Gaisama, in Valle del Cauca. “The adults know that if it’s done here and something happens to the girl, there are consequences... We know it is not normal for a girl, even if it’s part of a tradition.”

To raise awareness about the negative impact of FGM, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is holding Facebook Live programming all day today. Watch live at facebook.com/UNFPA.

[UN Middle East envoy ‘concerned’ over scheduled vote on Israel’s settlement regularisation bill](#)

6 February 2017 – The top United Nations Middle East envoy today expressed concern about the scheduled vote by the Knesset, Israel’s legislative body, on a bill that would “legalize” Israeli settlements on privately-owned Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

“I am concerned by the scheduled vote on the so-called ‘Regularisation Bill’ as it would enable the continued use of privately-owned Palestinian land for Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank,” said the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, in a statement.

“If adopted into law, it will have far reaching legal consequences for Israel and greatly diminish the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace,” Mr. Mladenov added, noting that the bill has been deemed unconstitutional by the Attorney General of Israel and is in contravention of international law.

“I urge Israeli legislators to reconsider this move,” he stated, stressing that all core issues should be resolved between the parties through direct negotiations on the basis of relevant Security Council resolutions and mutual agreements.