

Urging 'bold decisions' to end Yemen conflict, UN envoy says viable peace plan within reach

26 January 2017 – Amid attacks and counter-attacks, those seeking a military solution will only prolong the suffering caused by the war, allow the terrorist threat to grow and deepen the challenges that will face the country's eventual recovery, the United Nations envoy for the war-riven country said today.

Briefing the Security Council, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, said the past several months have seen a "dangerous escalation" of military activities with tragic consequences for the Yemeni people. Also briefing the Council was UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien.

Indeed, he explained, armed hostilities continued in many areas of the country, including Sana'a governorate, Taiz city and in border areas between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

"Civilians in Taiz continue to suffer from indiscriminate shelling in the city's residential areas, with such attacks increasing in recent days, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed said, adding that ground fighting and airstrikes had also escalated along the western coastline following the launch of operation Golden Spear by the Yemeni Government and allied forces.

Both sides continue to claim significant military progress in the media, "but I remain convinced that there is no possibility of a military solution."

Describing "daily attacks and counter-attacks," he said the continued military activities are all the more tragic as viable proposal for peace is on the table and within reach of both parties. "With political courage and will, the war can be stopped," he said, pressing both sides to demonstrate the political courage needed to stop the nearly two-year-long war.



Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Secretary General's Special Envoy for Yemen, briefs the Security Council. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Recalling that during a meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister in Riyadh on 18 December 2016, senior officials from Oman, United Arab Emirates, United States and the United Kingdom had concluded with calls for a rapid cessation of hostilities, he said: "We are committed to ensuring that the upcoming cessation of hostilities will be durable and provide real relief to the Yemeni people."

He went on to state that, while Ansar Allah and the General People's Congress had accepted the road map as a basis for consultations last November, their

unwillingness to discuss security arrangements seriously did not help to advance peace. Moreover, he also was disappointed at their decision to appoint a parallel government, and urged President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to commit himself to consultations based on the proposals.

Stressing that “there is a clear path out of the violence,” Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed emphasized that his proposals have reflected the concerns and needs of both sides, and took Yemen’s political, security and social situations into consideration. “I hope Yemen’s leaders will be able to see the impact that this tragedy has had on the country, make the bold decision to commit to a political solution and put an end to the senseless violence.”

UN aid chief warns of ‘silent deaths,’ possible famine scenario for 2017

For his part, Mr. O’Brien said the conflict in Yemen is now the primary driver of the largest food security emergency in the world. “If there is no immediate action, famine is now a possible scenario for 2017.”

From the beginning of the hostilities in March 2015 to 31 December 2016, 7,469 Yemenis were killed and 40,483 injured due to the conflict, he said, noting that the true number is likely to be higher. The casualty figures include more than 1,400 children killed and over 2,140 children injured. Another 1,441 children have been recruited by warring parties, some as young as eight years old.

Beyond the direct casualties of the armed conflict, there are also the so-called ‘silent deaths’ of Yemenis that go largely unnoticed and unrecorded, he said.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which Mr. O’Brien heads up, more than two thirds of the population – an alarming 18.8 million – is in need of humanitarian and protection assistance, including an astounding 10.3 million Yemenis who require immediate assistance to save or sustain their lives. This is about the size of the entire population of Sweden and the numbers are rising, he added.

Some 14 million people are currently food insecure, of whom half are severely food insecure.

So far, he said, the UN verified over 325 attacks on schools, health facilities, markets, roads, bridges and even water points. Over two thirds of the damage to public infrastructure is a result of airstrikes.

In spite of the difficult conditions and tremendous challenges, the humanitarian community reached 5.6 million Yemenis in 2016, with more than 114 aid organizations are working in Yemen, he said, adding that thanks to the swift intervention by humanitarian partners, the cholera outbreak which started in October is now in decline.

Roughly \$2 billion is required to support the 2017 humanitarian response, targeting 10 million of the most vulnerable people in Yemen. “I request Member States to pledge generously at the forthcoming Yemen Pledging Conference in late March,” Mr. O’Brien stressed.

He concluded his briefing by requesting Council members to once again call for an immediate ceasefire and cessation of hostilities and use their influence over the parties to the conflict to ensure that they respect international humanitarian law and to provide timely, full and unimpeded humanitarian access.

[Syria: UN chief Guterres clarifies tasks of panel lay groundwork for probe into possible war crimes](#)

26 January 2017 – Following the approval late last year of an independent panel to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity in Syria, the United Nations today announced that the mechanism will be headed by a senior judge or prosecutor with extensive criminal investigations and prosecutions experience.

According to a note from a UN spokesperson, the mechanism will be established in phases until it is fully functioning and the Secretary-General will announce the person leading it by the end of February.

The head of the mechanism, which is formally called the ‘International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011,’ will be assisted by a deputy and a secretariat.

The two primary tasks assigned to the mechanism include:

- Collecting, consolidating, preserving and analyzing evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses; and
- Preparing files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, in accordance with international law standards, in national, regional or international courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes, in accordance with international law.

In discharging its responsibilities, the mechanism will closely cooperate and coordinate with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (Syria CoI) and the two panels will be complementary to each other.

“However, there is a clear distinction between the Syria CoI and the mechanism in terms of functions. The Syria CoI focuses on information collection, publicly reporting and making recommendations notably to Member States,” explained the spokesperson.

The mechanism will build on the information collected by others, by collecting, consolidating, preserving and analysing evidence and information. It will also prepare files to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the most serious crimes under international law.

The resolution approving the mechanism was adopted by the General Assembly – the universal body comprising all 193 UN Members States – on 21 December by a recorded vote of 105 in favour and 15 against, with 52 abstentions.

See also: Syria: UN approves mechanism to lay groundwork for investigations into possible war crimes

South Sudan: Head of UN mission meets President Kiir, pledges commitment to regional force

26 January 2017 – The newly arrived head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, David Shearer, has met with President Salva Kiir in the country's capital of Juba, where he reiterated the Mission's commitment to supporting peace efforts.

According to a UN spokesperson, in a meeting yesterday, Mr. Shearer told President Kiir that the UN and UNMISS are there to support the Government and help the people of South Sudan, and said his job will be done when the conditions in the world's youngest country permit UNMISS to leave. He added that he had come to South Sudan with an open mind.

Mr. Shearer also met with the South Sudanese Minister of Cabinet Affairs. The UN said Mr. Shearer was pleased to hear the Minister reiterate South Sudan Government's commitment to the deployment of the Regional Protection Force (RPF) mandated by the UN Security Council in August 2016.

UNMISS was deployed in July 2011, just as South Sudan gained independence from Sudan. The current strength of the Mission is some 13,000 uniformed personnel and more than 2,000 international and local civilian staff.

South Sudan has faced ongoing challenges since a political stalemate erupted into full blown conflict in December 2013. The crisis has produced one of the world's worst displacement situations with immense suffering for civilians.

UN aid officials urge Security Council to push for greater humanitarian access in Syria

26 January 2017 – Senior United Nations relief officials today urged the Security Council to do more to ensure the support of the Syrian Government to deliver life-saving aid, warning that aid workers are “blocked at every turn” while some 4.6 million people live in hard-to-reach areas across the war-ravaged country.

“We continue to be blocked at every turn, by lack of approvals at central and local levels, disagreements on access routes, and by the violation of agreed procedures at checkpoints by parties to the conflict,” UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien told the Council in a briefing alongside senior officials from the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization.

He noted that “if one brave aid worker drives through the checkpoint without the facilitation letter and the command transmitted down the line” the guard or a sniper shoots.

“The fault is not at the door of the UN or the [non-governmental organizations] – it is the Syrian Government and the governors,” Mr. O’Brien said. “We need to be allowed to pass – not as a favour but as a right – and safely.”

In addition to millions of people living in hard-to-reach areas, an estimated 644,000 people live in 13 areas under siege in the country, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which Mr. O’Brien heads.

While the figure is down from last year, “it should not be mistaken for progress,” the senior UN official stressed. He added that groups use sieges as weapons of war, which “does nothing other than to punish civilians, who already bear the brunt of this terrible conflict.”



Children of Aleppo, Syria, carry home hot meals that the World Food Programme (WFP) helps provide to displaced families. Photo: WFP

Mr. O’Brien also voiced deep concerns about reports of stockpiled aid in eastern Aleppo since the city’s evacuation, which OCHA is looking into. Such reports highlight the importance of unhindered aid not only for delivery but for monitoring and distribution of aid.

The food situation, in particular, is extremely worrying said Amir Mahmoud Abdulla, Deputy Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

He said some seven million people in Syria are now food insecure and an additional two million are at risk. Food production has hit an all-time low, he said, as widespread insecurity hampers access to land and supplies, fuel is in short supply, and infrastructure is often damaged.

“Four in five Syrians now live in poverty with almost 80 per cent of households across the country struggle to cope with food shortages,” said Mr. Abdulla.

If nothing changes, Syria could become “a country of subsistence farmers with most of its commercial agriculture base eroded.”

Both UN aid officials also used today’s briefing to again call for a political solution to the crisis, underscoring the importance of the 8 February talks in Geneva to be held under UN auspices, and the UN conference with the European Union in the beginning of April.

“After a chronicle of missed opportunities, this is the time for the various parties to come together and bring an end to this horrendous chapter in Syria’s history,” Mr. O’Brien said.

Speaking by teleconference from Geneva, Peter Salama, Executive Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Emergencies Programme, said that war has taken a serious toll on civilians and the health workers, hospitals and clinics serving them. Until recent security developments, 30,000 people had sustained war-related injuries every month, he recalled.

“The war has gutted the health system,” with more than 100 attacks launched against health centres in 2016 alone, he said, adding that it has led to acute shortages and blocked access to services. Half of all Syrian children were not receiving the required vaccinations and more than 300,000 pregnant women lacked the care they need.

Underscoring the importance of the safety of those providing such services, he said WHO is working to ensure access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, and an end to attacks on health workers, with perpetrators being held accountable. Moving forward, Syria’s health system must be rebuilt, with strong support from the international community, he emphasized.

Amid hate speech, negative media spin ‘real stories’ of refugees and migrants must be told – UN official

26 January 2017 – With hate speech and rhetoric against migrants and refugees on the rise in various parts of the world, and the increased role of media in

shaping perceptions towards them, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) today co-sponsored with the European Union (EU) a symposium drawing attention to this growing challenge and explore efforts to combat it.

"2016 has been an elections year in many countries. Media, for better or for worse, was used as a tool shaping people's perceptions around issues and swaying their votes accordingly," Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the High Representative for the UNAOC, said in his remarks at the symposium.

Noting that the refugees and migrants crisis featured prominently in the campaigns and public discussions, he added: "[While] we noted solidarity towards refugees, we also witnessed a surge of xenophobic hate speech."

Further, noting that mass exodus of refugees and migrants fleeing conflict and poverty in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other countries into Europe resulted in "fuelling fears, prejudices and even hatred against those who are perceived as 'the other' by local populations," he expressed that such distorted perceptions have also led to violent reactions within host societies on some occasions.

With this in mind, he noted that the UN global campaign against racism and xenophobia, 'Together: respect, safety and dignity for all,' aims to change negative perceptions and attitudes towards refugees and migrants, and to strengthen the social contract between these populations and host communities.



Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). Photo: UNAOC

Amid media distortion, 'we will do our utmost to tell the real stories of refugees'

Speaking to *UN News* ahead of the symposium, Mr. Al-Nasser expressed concern that migrants and refugees are inaccurately portrayed as an economic drain or a strain on public benefits, even though UN Member States have recognized the positive contribution of migrants to inclusive growth and sustainable development, for example through the 2030 Agenda and the New York Declaration on refugees and migrants adopted at a UN summit last year.

He, however, added that "migrants' positive contribution to societies is not acknowledged and rarely understood by host communities."

Underlining the importance of media, and in particular social media, which can influence perceptions either way, Mr. Al-Nasser said that despite progressive policies defended by some European leaders, refugees continue to be portrayed by some in the media as "potential terrorists" and "threats to national security".

"Social media provides a wide and open platform for hate speech, facilitating the rapid spread of negative narratives and ideas online," he added, noting

that this environment has created a heightened sense of fear and mistrust in host communities towards migrants and refugees around the world, resulting in adverse impact on their rights and freedoms.

“But we will do our utmost to tell the real stories of refugees, in order to protect communities’ interests and safeguard the rights of each individual. I think a balance must be found that protects the freedom of expression as well as the rights of migrants as human beings with human rights,” the High Representative stated.

Turning to civil society, Mr. Al-Nasser called on the international community to acknowledge the role of civic actors and groups in formulating public policies aimed at curbing the spread of hate speech, and influencing public attitudes towards restricting the use of hate speech in media, including through policy recommendations.

The symposium was organized jointly by UNAOC and the EU in the Belgian capital, Brussels, under the UNAOC’s #SpreadNoHate initiative.

The Alliance was established in 2005 to work towards a more peaceful, more socially inclusive world, by building mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious identities, and highlighting the will of the world’s majority to reject extremism and embrace diversity.