

More than words, ending Yemen crisis needs results, UN envoy says, concluding mission in capital

23 January 2017 – The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, today concluded a mission to Yemen with a call for a comprehensive political settlement of the crisis and the restoration of the cessation of hostilities, and underlined the need allow access of civilian commercial aircrafts to and from Sana'a airport.

“It is mandatory that the parties end the violence to ease the suffering of the Yemeni people and pave the way for a peacefully negotiated settlement,” said Mr. Cheikh Ahmed.

In his meetings, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed urged his interlocutors to enter into detailed discussions on the withdrawal of forces and handover of medium and heavy weapons.

“There is an urgent need for Ansar Allah and the General People's congress to provide a well elaborated plan on security, withdrawal and handover of medium and heavy weapons,” he said, noting that the plan constitutes an essential part of the comprehensive peace agreement which is the UN is aiming to implement.

“What we need at this stage is more than words, what we need is commitment and results. Delays in providing the plan will result in delays to achieving peace and allow for more deaths and further economic and humanitarian deterioration,” he added.

Further, the UN Special Envoy called on all relevant actors to take necessary measures to lift restrictions on civilian commercial aircrafts to access Sana'a International Airport.

Restrictions on travel in and out of Sana'a airport have prevented scores of Yemenis from receiving badly-needed medical treatment and have also left many others stranded outside the country.

“This cannot continue,” he stressed, calling on the Government of Yemen to “allow the resumption of commercial flights to Sana'a without further delay and for all parties to ensure the safety of the airport and air traffic.”

Religious leaders deserve full support in quest for peace, says UN adviser on genocide prevention

23 January 2017 – Religious leaders and faith-based organizations have a responsibility to contribute to peaceful societies and the international community must support these grassroots peacemakers in their daily activities, the United Nations official mandated to fight genocide today told an international meeting on religion.

Addressing the third annual symposium on ‘The Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs,’ now under way at UN Headquarters in New York, Adama Dieng, the UN Special Adviser for Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, said that religious leaders “have a responsibility to contribute to the building of peaceful, inclusive and cohesive societies that are resilient to conflict, violent extremism and atrocity crimes.”

The Office of Mr. Dieng is one of the sponsors of the symposium, along with the UN Inter-agency Task Force for Engagement with Faith-based Organizations and the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN. This year’s thematic focus is on just, inclusive and sustainable peace.

Mr. Dieng, who is currently in Doha participating in a meeting on the responsibility to protect, delivered his address via a video message. He said the primary responsibility for creating sustained peace lies with States, who must promote the values of diversity and manage diversity constructively – however, “collaboration” with religious leaders remains vital.

“They can reach out to and influence large numbers of people,” Mr. Dieng. He added that religious leaders “provide support during emergencies, respond to the needs of marginalized communities, as well as address grievances as soon as they emerge and advocate for the rights of their communities.”

Last year, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2282 (2016) , which calls for a comprehensive approach to transitional justice and accountability to consolidate peace, reduce poverty and prevent countries from relapsing into conflict.

In his video message, Mr. Dieng discussed his recent work with religious leaders on the Fez Plan of Action on the role of religious leaders and actors in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes. The Plan was named after the Moroccan city where the first steps on a strategy on the role of religious leaders were taken in 2015.

According to Mr. Dieng, the Plan will be launched in New York during the first quarter of this year, followed by meetings on its implementation.

“Implementing the Fez Plan of Action will be a good starting point in enhancing religious actors’ engagement in the prevention of atrocity crimes, as well as enhancing collaboration among religious leaders, Member States and civil society to prevent incitement to violence,” he said.

Afghanistan: UN-backed \$550 million aid plan aims to reach 5.7 million people

23 January 2017 – A newly-launched United Nations-backed humanitarian response plan for Afghanistan is seeking \$550 million in 2017 to support the most vulnerable and marginalized population of the conflict-torn country.

Strategic, life-saving interventions – related to shelter, food, health care, nutrition, safe water and sanitation – are expected to reach an estimated 5.7 million people under the Afghanistan 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan, released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

According to the Plan, the continued deepening and geographic spread of the conflict has prompted a 13 per cent increase in the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance to 9.3 million in 2017.

OCHA notes that Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous, and most violent, crisis-ridden countries in the world. The 8,397 civilian casualties in the first nine months of 2016 marked the highest record since 2009, and included a 15 per cent increase in child casualties from 2015.

The Plan dedicates \$240 million to interventions to assist refugees and returnees.

In 2016, the conflict has led to unprecedented levels of displacement, reaching half a million in November – the highest number recorded to date. On average, every day sees another 1,500 people forced to leave their homes, escaping violence.

Last year also saw the unprecedented return of some 600,000 registered refugees and undocumented Afghans from Pakistan. With no obvious prospects for an improved state of affairs, 2017 is likely to see at least 450,000 new internally displaced persons and potentially as many as a million more Afghan returns from Pakistan and Iran.

Seven million people in Lake Chad basin 'living on the edge' – UN relief official

23 January 2017 – Spotlighting the desperate plight of millions in Africa's Lake Chad basin, the top United Nations humanitarian official for the Sahel region called today for international solidarity with the people in urgent need.

"I wish I had good news, but I don't," Toby Lanzer, the Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, told a news conference at the UN Headquarters, in New York that was largely focused on the crisis affecting Lake Chad basin countries, which include Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

"11 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid, 7.1 million of them are severely food insecure. [They are] living on the edge – surviving on, if they can, one meal a day," he noted.

Mr. Lanzer added that among them, the situation of children is particularly worrying. Some 515,000 children are severely and acutely malnourished and their lives are at risk if aid does not reach them urgently.

"No government on Earth can do what it takes to confront [these numbers] of severe food insecurity," he stressed. "This is a clear case where international solidarity with the governments of the region is needed."

He also noted the peaceful resolution of the political standoff in the Gambia prevented "yet another crisis" in the region, which already has at least 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDP). Fearing violence this past weekend, some 52,000 Gambians fled to Senegal and Guinea Bissau, but are now starting to return.



Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, Toby Lanzer, briefs journalists on the latest developments in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Response to bombing of IDP camp in Rann, Nigeria

Turning to the tragic bombing of a camp for IDPs in Nigeria's Rann, Mr. Lanzer hailed the efforts of the first responders – relatives of those in the camp, as well as nearby villagers – who rushed in to help the victims.

We sprang into action, in exactly the way we are meant to do

The UN and humanitarian family too stepped in from the onset of the disaster, helping the first responders as well as helping transfer those severely injured to medical facilities.

The UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) also flew in medical supplies and teams on the day of the incident and in subsequent days.

“We sprang into action, in exactly the way we are meant to do,” said the UN relief official. “It was a tremendous effort from the local and community aid workers, as well as by international humanitarians.”

Improving security reveals depth of humanitarian suffering

Responding a question, Mr. Lanzer explained the scale of humanitarian suffering in the region has become increasingly evident with improving security situation as a result of the military campaign against Boko Haram. This has allowed humanitarian actors to reach many places which were impossible to get to earlier due to insecurity.

Speaking on the situation on the ground at that time, he said: “[We saw] towns and villages that were totally destroyed. [Places] that were completely cut off for over three years [and places] devoid of two-, three- and four-year olds because they have died.”

Upcoming conference in Oslo

Mr. Lanzer also informed the media about an upcoming conference for the region, to be held in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, on 24 February, to draw attention to the tragic situation there.

He further noted that the humanitarian appeal for the region for 2016 was only 52 per cent funded.

“When you are funded to this extent, a lot of lives are lost,” he said, “We hope that with the leadership of Norway, Germany, Nigeria and the support of the UN, we can convince many Member States to go to Oslo and make statements of political support and also, we hope, material support, that will allow the agencies to do their work to save lives, as well as give people a hand up.”

Secretary-General Guterres approves updated UN whistleblower protection policy

23 January 2017 – Approving an updated United Nations whistleblower policy today, Secretary-General António Guterres is seeking to enhance protection

for individuals who report possible misconduct or cooperate with duly authorized audits or investigations.

As part of his reform agenda, Mr. Guterres has made it a priority for the UN to have a whistleblower protection policy that meets the highest possible standards, and the updated plan aims to ensure the Organization functions in a more open, transparent and fair manner. UN Staff and management both agreed on the policy, contained in a bulletin that was just issued, which meets best practices.

According to UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, the major changes include the following elements:

1. The Ethics Office and Office of Internal Oversight Services will now be able to take preventive action where a risk of retaliation has been identified (instead of staff being required to identify a specific retaliatory act before they can request protection);
2. The policy affords protection from retaliation to whistleblowers who report wrongdoing committed not only by staff but also by contractors, non-UN peacekeepers and others;
3. Staff now have the right to seek review of Ethics Office determinations; and
4. Complainants will be notified of disciplinary measures taken against staff members found to have retaliated against them.

Mr. Dujarric noted that the Secretary General has also tasked an internal working group to examine whether the policy on protection against retaliation should be further expanded to also provide more protections for consultants and individual contractors. The UN chief has given the working group a deadline of 30 June 2017 to come back with their recommendations on this.

Until this matter is decided, the Secretary-General has asked that the Ethics Office continue its practice of providing assistance to consultants and individual contractors who seek protection against retaliation. To include this category of individuals within the policy would have resource implications, Mr. Dujarric added.

The Secretary-General is in favour of enhancing the independence of the Ethics Office by having it report directly to the General Assembly, instead of through the current arrangements, which provide for it to report to the Secretary-General, explained the UN spokesperson, noting that the Secretary-General has requested the Ethics Office to urgently examine this issue and to report its advice. Such a change in reporting line would require the General Assembly's approval, he added.