

Hundreds of thousands trapped in Mosul with 'worst yet to come' – UN agency

24 March 2017 – An estimated 400,000 Iraqi civilians are trapped in Mosul's Old City as fighting intensifies and people continue to flee, the United Nations refugee agency representative today warned.

"The worst is yet to come," said Bruno Geddo, the Representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Iraq.

Speaking by phone, Mr. Geddo said the fighting in the west has been more intense than in the less densely populated east of the city, where the battle ended in January.

"People are stuck between a rock and a hard place," he added. "There's fighting shelling, bombing."

When people try to flee, extremists shoot them. Some have tried to leave during prayers or under cover of fog at first light but were killed, Mr. Geddo said.

Meanwhile, life in the Old City is becoming impossible with a lack of food, clean water or fuel, Mr. Geddo said.

Meeting with civilians at the UNHCR transit and reception centre at Hammam al-Alil, outside of the city centre, Mr. Geddo said the number of people moving through has "surged" in recent days with up to 12,000 people arriving daily.

Some 340,000 people have been displaced since the fighting in Mosul started last October. Of those, about 72,000 have returned home.

VIDEO: Desperate to flee fighting, thousands of displaced Iraqis from west Mosul are arriving in Hammam al-Alil camp, a few kilometres south of the city. Many spend their first night in a reception centre awaiting their tents. Others are transferred to nearby camps to reunite with other family members. *Credit: UNHCR*

The UN representative called on all those fighting to allow civilians to leave areas of conflict for safer zones, and no one should be forced to come back home.

"Liberating Mosul is necessary but not sufficient," Mr. Geddo said. "We equally have to get it right with the protection of civilians and in the humanitarian response."

UN agencies, partners to launch polio vaccination campaign across Africa

24 March 2017 – More than 116 million children are set to be immunized against polio starting tomorrow in one of the largest of its kind synchronized vaccination campaigns across west and central Africa, United Nations agencies today announced.

All children under five years of age in the 13 countries will be simultaneously immunized in a coordinated effort to raise childhood immunity to polio across the continent, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a press release.

Twenty years, ago, every single country on the continent was endemic to polio, and every year, more than 75 000 children were paralysed for life by this terrible disease. Thanks to the dedication of governments, communities, parents and health workers, this disease is now beaten back to this final reservoir," said Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

The campaign aims to vaccinate all young children in Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

Of particular concern are the five Lake Chad Basin countries. Four children were paralysed by the disease last year in north-eastern Nigeria where insecurity cut off health access. This area is one of the few where polio is active.

"Polio eradication will be an unparalleled victory, which will not only save all future generations of children from the grip of a disease that is entirely preventable but will show the world what Africa can do when it unites behind a common goal," said UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, Marie-Pierre Poirier.

Organizers said that more than 190,000 polio vaccinators will deliver bivalent oral polio vaccine (bOPV) to every house across all cities, towns and villages of the 13 countries.

"Volunteers and health workers will work up to 12 hours per day, travelling on foot or bicycle, in often stifling humidity and temperatures in excess of 40°C. Each vaccination team will carry the vaccine in special carrier bags, filled with ice packs to ensure the vaccine remains below the required 8°C," according to the press release.

The polio campaign will run through 28 March.

Child rights must be at the centre of Syria peace talks – UNICEF

24 March 2017 – Those participating the intra-Syrian peace talks in Geneva must put the rights of children at the centre of all their deliberations as children throughout the Middle Eastern country continue to come under attack, a senior United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) official has said.

Those meeting in Geneva this week should put the rights of children at the centre of all their deliberations – the right of every boy and girl to be protected, the right to receive life-saving humanitarian assistance no matter where they are and the right to an education, UNICEF Regional Director Geert Cappelaere said in a statement issued yesterday, ahead of the resumption of the Geneva talks.

Citing reports that Wednesday's attack on a school in Ar-Raqqa which is sheltering internally displaced families has killed 53 civilians including 12 children, he said the international community once again failed the children of Syria. "We have been failing them for more than 2,200 days already," he added.

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UNICEF reminds all parties engaged militarily in Syria that it is their responsibility to protect and safeguard the lives of children and their families. Civilian infrastructure including schools and hospitals should be protected, no matter who controls the area, Mr. Geert said.

He said that children are being deprived of their basic right to life and denied their right to an education.

All parties to the conflict and those with influence must redouble their efforts to find a political solution to end a conflict that is leaving nothing but death and destruction in its path," he said.

China releases draft bike-sharing regulations

[unable to retrieve full-text content]The booming bike-sharing industry has

led bicycle associations in China to produce a draft guideline Thursday to regulate the industry.

Chinese vice premier stresses safety of rivers, reservoirs

[unable to retrieve full-text content]Vice Premier Wang Yang said Thursday the country must ensure the security of major rivers and reservoirs and the effectiveness of flood control measures in major cities.