

'We need to start now' on road to peace, UN envoy says as Syria negotiations open in Geneva

23 February 2017 – Welcoming the representatives of the Syrian Government and its opposition to the United Nations-facilitated negotiations that opened today in Geneva, Staffan de Mistura reiterated the need to work together for a political solution.

"We face an uphill battle. It will not be easy," the UN Special Envoy for Syria said, "but we must apply ourselves to this task."

"Let's try to work together to end this horrible conflict and lay the foundation for a country at peace with itself, sovereign and unified," he noted.

Making reference to the Palais des Nations where the intra-Syrian negotiations are being held, he said the UN headquarters in Switzerland was a symbol "unifying all of us" given its history and could be the place where "Syrians started a long, hard journey to peace."

He stressed that after six years of conflict, people are waiting for a relief from all suffering and dream "for a new road out of this nightmare."

Mr. de Mistura is continuing to push for a resolution to the conflict based on UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) that endorsed a road map for peace process in Syria, including specific language on governance, constitution, elections, and even how negotiations should be timed.



On 5 August 2016 in Aleppo, Syria, a child with spinal muscular atrophy who needs special medical care, now lives on the streets, after fleeing with her family from attacks and intense fighting in the 1070 neighbourhood. Photo: UNICEF/Khuder Al-Issa

Today's intra-Syrian negotiations follow talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, where participants agreed on how to monitor the ceasefire effort started in December 2016.

As in Astana, representatives of Russia and the United States are among the Security Council Member States present at the discussions.

Syrian women and children bearing the brunt

The Special Envoy also pledged to do everything to promote the role of Syrian women in the political efforts.

Earlier today, he was greeted by a group of Syrian women holding a vigil in Geneva for relatives and friends – sometimes children – who had been arrested, abducted or are still missing apparently as a result of the Government or the opposition.

Calling them Syrian mothers, wives and daughters, Mr. de Mistura said they were symbolic of everyone still missing “in this horrible conflict.”

He pledged to raise the issue of detainees, abducted and missing people as part of the ongoing discussions.

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) today urged participants to the talks to put Syria’s children first.

In a statement UNICEF Regional Director Geert Cappelaera said at least 20 children were reportedly killed in attacks in the country since the start of this year, and many more injured.

“The numbers are a grim indication that the cessation in hostilities announced last December has yet to result in real gains in protection and humanitarian assistance for all children in Syria,” Mr. Cappelaera said.

“What if these were your children?” he asked.

VIDEO: UN Special Envoy for Syria, Steffan de Mistura, has acknowledged the “long, hard journey” ahead, while calling on all sides to work together towards a political solution to the country’s protracted conflict.

Millions in Lake Chad suffering ‘at no fault of their own’ need world’s support, urges UN aid chief

23 February 2017 – Ahead of a major donors conference in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, seeking to generate global action to tackle the complex crisis in Africa’s Lake Chad Basin, the top United Nations relief official highlighted that investing in support for the region will in turn help strengthen broader security around the world for all to benefit.

“The opportunity we have at this gathering in Oslo [is for a partnership] between those who have been calling for enormous amounts of support [in the region and] to make sure that we can meet the needs of people as they go through terrible suffering, through no fault of their own,” UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien told *UN News*.

The UN aid chief’s comments come ahead of the Oslo Humanitarian Conference on

Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, which will be held tomorrow and which will be hosted by Norway, together with Nigeria, Germany and the UN. Aiming to draw attention to the crisis, which has been largely overlooked, the event seeks to mobilize greater international involvement and increased funding for humanitarian efforts to prevent the situation from deteriorating further.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – the UN’s relief wing – nearly 11 million people in the region, comprising Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, need humanitarian assistance suffer from severe acute malnutrition, among them, about half a million are very young children – babies.

The appeal, amounting \$1.5 billion will fund relief operations in the region, including, inter alia, providing life-saving food and nutrition support to 1.6 million people, livelihood support to 1.4 million, primary health care for 4.4 million, measles vaccinations for over one million children, education support for almost 300,000 girls and boys and safe water, improved sanitation and hygiene for 2.3 million displaced families and their host communities.

VIDEO: UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien, has made a strong case for the need to urgently assist over 10 million people in Africa’s Lake Chad Basin, noting that the humanitarian support “is an investment for all of us.”

Of the total population in need (10.7 million), about 8.5 million are in north-eastern Nigeria which has seen years of violence as a result of Boko Haram militancy.

In particular noting the challenges in north-eastern Nigeria, Mr. O’Brien hailed the work of the humanitarian actors on the ground “they are staying, they are delivering – there have been some terrible and tragic losses of very brave and brilliant aid workers – and they continue working in some of the most atrocious and difficult conditions.”

Pointing out that the 2016 appeal was only about 50 per cent funded, he underlined that it meant that “we can only do about half of what we know needs to be done,” said Mr. O’Brien, also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the head of OCHA.

Also, noting that the international community had to be a partner and show that it has enough capacity and enable relief programmes for those who need it the most, he said that the support would help ensure that “the people [in need] can get water and food; we can [avert] the terrible severe acute malnutrition, we can seek to avert famine, which is exacerbated by some of the climatic events, and indeed, climate change.”



For the eighth consecutive year, civilians are suffering from Boko Haram violence in Africa’s Lake Chad Basin. These women live in a compound in Banki

town, in Nigeria's Borno state, close to the Cameroonian border. They believe their husbands were killed and have no source of income. Photo: OCHA/0. Fagan



The activities of Boko Haram continue to undermine the peace and stability. Insecurity, especially in parts of Nigeria's Borno and Yobe states, continues to hamper humanitarian operations. In areas that have recently opened up, civilians desperately need health, protection, shelter, water and sanitation. Protection needs in the countries north-east, particularly in newly accessible areas in Borno, remain severe. Photo: OCHA



While facing human rights violations and abuses including attacks, disappearances, forced displacement, about half a million children in Borno are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year. Famine-like conditions loom for over 120,000 people in the most affected parts of Borno and Yobe, while an estimated 11 million people in the region, comprising Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, need humanitarian assistance. Photo: OCHA



Although about one million displaced people have returned to their areas of origin since August 2015, and while the number continues to increase, many returnees remain stranded in other sites for displaced people because of ongoing insecurity, destroyed infrastructure and the absence of basic services. In Borno, for example, more than 470 health facilities are partially or completely destroyed. Photo: OCHA



The UN's humanitarian response has increased over the past year. Food assistance grew from reaching 600,000 people in August 2016 to 2.1 million people by December. Despite this progress, immediate funding is urgently required to support the scale-up of humanitarian operations. Photo: OCHA

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[UN health agency reports depression now 'leading cause of disability worldwide'](#)

23 February 2017 – Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, the United Nations health agency today reported, estimating that it affects

more than 300 million people worldwide – the majority of them women, young people and the elderly.

An estimated 4.4 per cent of the global population suffers from depression, according to a report released today by the UN World Health Organization (WHO), which shows an 18 per cent increase in the number of people living with depression between 2005 and 2015.

“Depression is different from usual mood fluctuations and short-lived emotional responses to challenges in everyday life,” the WHO said.

According to the report, which was released today ahead of April’s World Health Day, prevalence rates seem to peak in adults at around 60 years of age, but are also seen in teenagers.

When long-lasting and with moderate or severe intensity, depression may become a serious health condition leading, at its worst, to suicide. According to the report, some 800,000 people kill themselves every year, a significant number of them young adults between the ages of 15 and 29.

“Depression results from a complex interaction of social, psychological and biological factors,” WHO said, adding that depression can lead to more stress and dysfunction and worsen the affected person’s life situation.

To reduce depression, the UN agency recommends effective school-based programmes and exercise regimes.

Different psychological and psychosocial treatments were also noted in the report, which notes that health-care providers may offer behavioural activation, cognitive behavioural therapy [CBT], and interpersonal psychotherapy [IPT], or antidepressant medication (such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors [SSRIs] and tricyclic antidepressants [TCAs]).

Among the findings, however, the authors caution against using antidepressants to treat children or to quickly offer them to adolescents.

Some psychological treatment formats for consideration include individual and/or group face-to-face psychological treatments delivered by professionals and supervised lay therapists.

[‘Turn the tide on plastic’ urges UN, as microplastics in the seas now outnumber stars in our galaxy](#)

23 February 2017 – Launching an unprecedented global campaign, the United

Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is urging everyone to eliminate the use of microplastics and stop the excessive, wasteful use of single-use plastic, to save the world's seas and oceans from irreversible damage before it's too late.

"Plastic pollution is surfing onto Indonesian beaches, settling onto the ocean floor at the North Pole, and rising through the food chain onto our dinner tables," Erik Solheim, the Executive Director of UNEP, said in a news release announcing the campaign.

"We've stood by too long as the problem has gotten worse. It must stop," he added.

Through its Clean Seas campaign, the agency has urged countries and businesses to take ambitious measures to eliminate microplastics from personal-care products, ban or tax single-use plastic bags, and dramatically reduce other disposable plastic items by 2022.

Ten countries have already joined the initiative with far-reaching pledges: Indonesia has committed to slash its marine litter by 70 per cent by 2025; Uruguay will tax single-use plastic bags later this year; and Costa Rica will take measures to dramatically reduce single-use plastic through better waste management and education, according to UNEP.

These initiatives could not come sooner as up to 80 per cent of all litter in the oceans are made of plastic.

According to estimates, by 2050, 99 per cent of earth's seabirds will have ingested plastic

An illustration of the sheer magnitude of the problem is that as much as 51 trillion microplastic particles – 500 times more than stars in our galaxy – litter the seas.

Each year, more than eight million metric tonnes of plastic end up in oceans, wreaking havoc on marine wildlife, fisheries and tourism, and cost at least \$8 billion in damage to marine ecosystems. According to estimates, by 2050, oceans will have more plastic than fish if present trends are not arrested.

According to UNEP actions to stem the growing tide of maritime litter could include reducing the use of single-use plastics at the individual level such as by using reusable shopping bags and water bottles, choosing products without microbeads and plastic packaging, and not using straws to drink.

RELATED: UN environment agency urges ban of microplastics in cosmetics and personal care products

"Whether we choose to use plastic bags at the grocery store or sip through a plastic straw, our seemingly small daily decisions to use plastics are having a dramatic effect on our oceans," said film actor and founder of the Lonely Whale Foundation, Adrian Grenier.



Plastic bottles and garbage waste from a village in Timor-Leste wash on the shores of a river and then spill into the sea. UN Photo/Martine Perret

Similarly, on larger and commercial scale, supply chains can be modified.

One such example is the technology company DELL Computers: which has announced that it will use recovered ocean plastic in its product packaging.

“DELL is committed to putting technology and expertise to work for a plastic-free ocean,” said its Vice President for Global Operations, Piyush Bhargava. “Our new supply chain brings us one step closer to UNEP’s vision of Clean Seas by proving that recycled ocean plastic can be commercially reused.”

According to UNEP, major announcements are also expected at the upcoming conference on The Ocean at the UN Headquarters in New York (5-9 June), and UN the Environment Assembly to be held in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, in December.

“The ocean is the lifeblood of our planet, yet we are poisoning it with millions of tonnes of plastic every year,” expressed Peter Thomson, the President of the UN General Assembly, highlighting the upcoming conference and urging for ambitious pledges to reduce single-use plastic.

“Be it a tax on plastic bags or a ban on microbeads in cosmetics, each country [can] do their bit to maintain the integrity of life in the Ocean.”

[Security Council extends mandate of UN Guinea-Bissau peacebuilding office through 2018](#)

23 February 2017 – The United Nations Security Council today extended for another year the mandate of the UN Integrated Peace-Building Office in Guinea-Bissau, known as UNIOGBIS, and urged all political actors in the country to implement the provisions of the Conakry Agreement signed last October.

The Council endorsed the Conakry Agreement – which carries the name of the Guinean capital where it was signed in 2016 following talks between political leaders, civil society and religious leaders – saying that “it offers a historic opportunity for national authorities and political leaders, as well as civil society, to jointly ensure political stability and build sustainable peace.”

The 15-members of the Council welcomed and supported a high-level mission to the country that is expected to be dispatched by the regional bloc Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) as part of a follow-up for implementation of the Agreement.

Under its renewed mandate, which will begin on 1 March 2017 and run through at least 28 February 2018, UNIOGBIS will also continue to work with ECOWAS, its mission in Guinea-Bissau (ECOMIB) and other international partners to implement national security sector reform and strengthen the rule of law.

Among its primary responsibilities, the Council mandated the Office to focus its efforts on supporting an inclusive political dialogue and national reconciliation, and providing technical assistance to national authorities.

UNIOGBIS will also focus on supporting the Government of Guinea-Bissau in “mobilization, harmonization and coordination of international assistance,” with UN partners, the African Union (AU), the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLC), ECOWAS, the European Union (EU).

In 2014, the West African nation concluded a second round of presidential elections, which are widely seen as essential to restoring constitutional order, economic growth and development following a 2012 military coup.