

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.

UN-backed measles vaccination campaign to reach 4.7 million children in north-east Nigeria

26 January 2017 – A major vaccination campaign against a measles outbreak in northeast Nigeria is reaching 4.7 million children, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

"Security has improved in some areas so we have acted quickly to access places we could not previously reach and protect children from the spread of a very dangerous disease," said Mohamed Fall, UNICEF Representative in Nigeria, in a news release.

The campaign, concluding this week, is covering the three states most affected by the Boko Haram conflict – Adamawa, Borno and Yobe – where insecurity has limited vaccination efforts. "We are still extremely concerned about children living in large areas of Borno state that are not yet accessible," said Mr. Fall.

In 2016, there were approximately 25,000 cases of measles among children in Nigeria; 97 per cent of the cases were in children under the age of ten and at least a hundred children died.

Measles infections tend to increase during the first half of the year because of higher temperatures. Measles vaccination coverage across Nigeria remains low, with a little over 50 per cent of children reached, but in areas affected by conflict, children are particularly vulnerable.

The risks for malnourished children who have weakened immunity are further heightened.

The vaccination campaign, conducted in partnership with the Nigerian Government, the World Health Organization (WHO), and several non-governmental organizations, also includes a vitamin A supplement for children under five to boost their immunity, as well as de-worming tablets.

The emergency in northeast Nigeria remains acute with more than 1.6 million people displaced because of the conflict.

Of the \$115 million called for in 2016, only \$51 million was received. In 2017, UNICEF is seeking \$150 million to respond to the urgent humanitarian needs in northeast Nigeria.

Security Council approves six-month extension of UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus

26 January 2017 – Welcoming the progress thus far in negotiations led by Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot leaders, as well as ongoing efforts, the United Nations Security Council today encouraged the sides to “grasp the current opportunity with determination” to secure a comprehensive settlement in Cyprus.

Through a unanimously adopted resolution, the 15-member Council called on the leaders to “put their efforts behind further work on reaching convergences on the core issues.”

It also called on them to “improve the public atmosphere for the negotiations, including by focussing public messages on convergences and the way ahead, and delivering more constructive and harmonized messages.”

The Council further urged the implementation of confidence-building measures, and said that it looked forward to agreement on and implementation of further such mutually-acceptable steps, that can contribute to a conducive environment for a settlement.

Also in the resolution, the Security Council – the primary UN body responsible for matters related to international peace and security – decided to extend the mandate of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) until end of July this year.

The Council further called on the Turkish Cypriot side and Turkish forces to restore the military status quo in Strovilia, which existed there prior to 30 June 2000, as well as called on both sides to allow access to deminers and to facilitate the removal of the remaining mines in Cyprus within the buffer zone.

It also urged them to extend demining operations outside the buffer zone.

Also in the adopted text, the Council hailed efforts being undertaken by UNFICYP to implement the UN Secretary-General’s zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse and to ensure full compliance of its personnel with the UN code of conduct, and urged troop-contributing countries to take appropriate preventive action including conducting pre-deployment training.

It also called on the countries to take disciplinary action and other action to ensure full accountability in cases of such conduct involving their personnel.

UNFICYP – one of the longest-running UN peacekeeping missions – has been deployed on the Mediterranean island since 1964 to prevent further fighting between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities there and bring about a return to normal conditions.