

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.”

[At talks in Astana, UN envoy on Syria urges mechanism to oversee ceasefire](#)

23 January 2017 – International talks to extend the ceasefire in Syria started today in the Kazakh capital of Astana, with the United Nations Special Envoy said the ceasefire can be solidified if a mechanism to oversee and implement it is created.

“The chances of success will be greater if the parties here are able to agree on a mechanism to oversee and implement nationwide ceasefire. A mechanism to oversee and implement a nationwide ceasefire,” said Staffan de Mistura. “We didn’t have it in the past, that’s the reason why often

we failed.”

He encouraged the guarantors of the ceasefire to create a mechanism to implement the consolidation and de-confliction ceasefire measures, and “to see what else can be done to build confidence.”

Sitting alongside representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition, Mr. de Mistura reiterated that the only way to end the conflict and secure a political solution is through negotiation among the Syrians.

The closed-door meeting – convened by Iran, Russia and Turkey, with a representative from the United States attending as an observer – is meant to end tomorrow.

The Special Envoy said that he hoped by strengthening the ceasefire at the Astana meeting “we could see in Geneva genuine intra-Syrian negotiations,” referring to the 8 February negotiations to be held under the auspices of the UN.

“I would hope direct negotiations between empowered and inclusive delegations of the Government and the opposition to take place,” Mr. de Mistura said, which include issues of “governance, constitution , elections” in the context of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).

He praised the parties for the ceasefire announced by President Vladimir Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with support of Iran, in December for saving lives, and encouraged others to join.

“All other armed opposition groups not affiliated to terror organisations designated as such by the Security Council, in addition to groups allied with the Government, should also listen to the call to abide by the ceasefire,” Mr. de Mistura said.

Protection of civilians must be a crucial priority, he underscored, calling for the protection of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, water and electricity networks, and areas such as markets.

Syria: UNICEF calls for unimpeded aid access to children in besieged Deir ez-Zor

23 January 2017 – The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) today called for unimpeded and unconditional access to children in the besieged city of Deir ez-Zor, noting that they have not received regular humanitarian aid for more than two years.

UNICEF calls on all parties to the conflict in Syria to immediately lift all sieges and allow unimpeded and unconditional access to children in Deir ez-Zor and in all the 15 areas under siege across the country,” said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF's Regional Director, in a statement.

According to UNICEF, children in Deir ez-Zor have come under intense attack in the past week, and indiscriminate shelling has reportedly killed scores of civilians and forced others to remain in their homes. The escalation of violence threatens the lives of 93,000 civilians, including over 40,000 children who have been cut off from regular humanitarian aid for over two years.

In addition, food prices have skyrocketed to levels five to ten times higher than in the capital, Damascus, and chronic water shortages are forcing families to fetch untreated water from the Euphrates River, exposing children to the risk of waterborne diseases.

Nothing justifies the use of siege and the untold suffering that it unleashes on children. The children of Syria have already paid the highest price for a war that is not of their making,” Mr. Cappelaere said.

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.