

Starving children in famine-facing countries threatened by lack of water, sanitation – UN agency

29 March 2017 – In African and Middle Eastern countries facing famine, unsafe water is as dangerous for severely malnourished children as lack of food, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) today warned, noting that nearly 27 million people are at risk in northeast Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

“Unsafe water can cause malnutrition or make it worse, no matter how much food a malnourished child eats, he or she will not get better if the water they are drinking is not safe,” said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF Director of Emergency Programmes.

The UN agency is warning that a combination of malnutrition, dirty water and poor sanitation sets off a vicious cycle from which many children never recover.

In northeast Nigeria, where the fight on Boko Haram damaged or destroyed 75 per cent of water and sanitation infrastructure, some 3.8 million people have no access to safe water, according to UNICEF.

In Somalia, about one-third of the population is expected to need access to water and sanitation in the coming weeks, according to the UN agency, pushing the current needs from 3.3 million to 4.5 million of people.

Some 5.1 million people lack safe water, sanitation and hygiene in South Sudan, where half of the water points in the country have been damaged or destroyed.

RELATED: UN aid chief calls for access, funds to prevent spread of South Sudan's famine

The fighting in Yemen has displaced at least 14.5 million people, leaving them without basic sanitation and adequate drinking water, UNICEF cautioned. According to the latest figures, almost 2 million children are at risk of diarrheal diseases which, even before the conflict, were the second leading cause of death among children under the age of five.

UNICEF is working with other UN agencies, national authorities and local partners to provide safe water and sanitation to children.

“But without an end to the conflicts plaguing these countries, without sustainable and unimpeded access to the children in need of support and without more resources, even our best efforts will not be enough,” Mr. Fontaine said.

UN health agency highlights importance of measles vaccine amid Europe outbreak

29 March 2017 – Hundreds of measles cases have been reported in Europe – where the disease was believed to be nearing elimination – leading the United Nations health agency to urge families to vaccinate their children and for national authorities to take urgent measures to stop transmission at the borders.

“Outbreaks will continue in Europe, as elsewhere, until every country reaches the level of immunization needed to fully protect their populations,” said Zsuzsanna Jakab, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe.

At least 500 cases were diagnosed since this January, the majority in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Switzerland and Ukraine.

Measles are endemic in all of the above countries, and the estimated national immunization coverage with the second dose of measles-containing vaccine is believed to be less than the 95 per cent threshold.

“Measles continues to spread within and among European countries, with the potential to cause large outbreaks wherever immunization coverage has dropped below the necessary threshold,” WHO reported.

The largest outbreaks are in Romania, where more than 3,400 cases have been reported since January of last year, and in Italy, where more than 850 cases are expected in the coming weeks.

Measles is a highly contagious virus that remains endemic in most parts of the world. International standards recommend that the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine be given in two doses, starting at 12 to 15 months of age, and the second dose at 4 through 6 years of age.

“I urge all endemic countries to take urgent measures to stop transmission of measles within their borders, and all countries that have already achieved this to keep up their guard and sustain high immunization coverage. Together we must make sure that the hard-earned progress made towards regional elimination is not lost,” said Dr. Jakab.

DR Congo: UN and regional partners express concern about Kasai unrest

28 March 2017 – The United Nations and regional partner organizations today expressed deep concern about the situation in the central Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where at least two United Nations experts disappeared two weeks ago and dozens of police officers were reportedly found dead.

The UN, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the International Organization of La Francophonie (IOF) today released a joint statement warning that the level of violence and reported human rights violations necessitate “an urgent response from the country’s political leaders.”

The statement calls on defence and security forces to exercise restraint in the efforts to restore order, and encourages the recently-initiated dialogue between the Government and the Kamuina Nsapu militia.

The UN, AU, EU and IOF also reiterated their call for a credible investigation into the human rights violation and assurances that the perpetrators are held to account.

In the joint statement, the organizations underscored their support for the 31 December 2016 political agreement.

The agreement – facilitated by Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO) mediators, and reached in DRC’s capital, Kinshasa, on 31 December 2016 – represents a significant step towards a peacefully managed transition consistent with the democratic principles enshrined in the country’s Constitution.

Belarus: UN expert decries Government’s return to mass violence against peaceful protestors

28 March 2017 – A United Nations-appointed independent expert on the human rights situation in Belarus has expressed dismay over the Government’s return to the policy of violent mass repression against peaceful demonstrators, non-governmental organizations, journalists and political opponents, and is calling on the authorities there to stop harassment and violence.

“The events of the last weekend prove the pre-meditated character of the

repressive measures, and show an open return by the Government to its old policy of mass repression against citizens who exercise or dispense defense for human rights provided by the constitution and international treaties,” said the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus, Miklós Haraszti, in a news release from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

He was referring to the crackdown on March 25 and 26 against dozens of human rights defenders, both local and international, that came after hundreds of peaceful demonstrators against the Government’s social policies had been violently attacked, arbitrarily arrested and deprived of their liberty, and then summarily fined or sentenced to prison from one to two weeks.

Since early February, demonstrators have been protesting against a decree under which a fine can be levied against anyone who does not work more than 183 days and is not declared officially unemployed.

Mr. Haraszti said he was “particularly shocked” by the raid against non-governmental organizations, such as Viasna, in their own offices, accompanied by physical violence, and by the disappearance for three days of political opponent Mikalai Statkevich, who was eventually released from the facility of the intelligence service.

“Two weeks ago, I, together with other human rights experts, had warned that further violations could be committed by the Government of President Lukashenko, known for its history of violent oppression of any form of dissenting views,” the expert said, expressing regret that his fears materialized.

“I will continue to be vigilant and call on the international community to press for opening to dialogue with human rights defenders and those who promote peaceful and democratic change in Belarus,” Mr. Haraszti said.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

Protecting human rights essential in promoting sustainable supply chains – UN experts

28 March 2017 – The only way to achieve socially sustainable supply chains is if human rights are protected and respected, a group of UN experts said today in an open letter addressed to G20 leaders currently meeting in Geneva.

Despite contributing positively to social and economic development worldwide, links between global supply chains and negative human rights impacts persist, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights said.

Michael Addo, the current head of the Working Group said: "All too often, global supply chains are associated with human rights violations and abuses such as unsafe working conditions, child and forced labour, livelihoods destroyed by toxic industrial wastes, land seizures without compensation, and persecution of those who speak up against such abuse."

Millions of lives are affected by the actions of companies in global supply chains and as such, governments and companies have enormous potential to promote sustainable development and uphold human rights, as long as they work together to do so, the working group noted.

The letter calls on governments to "lead by example," in their roles as economic actors in ensuring that state-owned or controlled business respect human rights.

G20 members are meeting to prepare a ministerial declaration for more inclusive global economic growth.

"The G20 represents 85 percent of global economic output, 75 percent of world trade, and two-thirds of the world's population, and includes both major 'developed' and 'emerging' economies," Mr. Addo noted.

"G20 leaders are therefore uniquely placed to address the human rights risks and impacts associated with global supply chains. They also have a unique responsibility to demonstrate leadership on this critical issue for our time," he said.

The UN Working Group also said that any commitments to promoting sustainable supply chains must be founded on the globally-agreed UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The Working Group on human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises was established by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011. Along with current Chair Mr. Addo, its members are: Surya Deva, Dante Pesce, Anita Ramasastry and Pavel Sulyandziga.

The Working Group reports to the UN Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly. Its experts Special Procedures are independent and are not UN staff. They are also independent from any government or organization. They serve in their individual capacity and do not receive a salary for their work.