

UN rights expert calls on Myanmar authorities to protect the Rohingya population

27 February 2017 – Concluding a four-day visit to parts of Bangladesh where she met with members of Myanmar's Rohingya community who fled there after violence following attacks on a border post in early October and the ensuing military operations, a United Nations expert called for urgent action by the Government of Myanmar to end the suffering of the Rohingya population in the country.

"The magnitude of violence that these families have witnessed and experienced is far more extensive than I had originally speculated," highlighted Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar.

She recounted several allegations of horrific attacks including the slitting of some people's throats, indiscriminate shootings, houses being set alight with people tied up inside and very young children being thrown into the fire, as well as gang rapes and other sexual violence.

Earlier this month, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a flash report, based on its interviews with the people who fled Myanmar, in which it documented mass gang-rape, killings, including of babies and young children, brutal beatings, disappearances and other serious human rights violations by the country's security forces.

In addition to the alleged human rights violations occurring within the context of the security operations that followed the 9 October attacks, Ms. Lee also highlighted today how the Government of Myanmar appears to have taken, and continues to take, actions which discriminate against the Rohingya and make their lives even more difficult.

RELATED: UN report details 'devastating cruelty' against Rohingya population in Myanmar's Rakhine province

"I urge the Government of Myanmar to immediately cease the discrimination that the community continues to face, to act now to prevent any further serious rights violations and to conduct prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into those already alleged to have occurred," said the UN rights expert.

"We all owe it to those I have met and their fellow community members to do everything in our power to ensure this is done and to give the Rohingya people reason to hope again," she added.

During her mission to Bangladesh, Ms. Lee visited the capital Dhaka and the town of Cox's Bazar, located near its border with Myanmar, where many members

of the Rohingya community had fled to. Ms. Lee will present her full report to the UN Human Rights Council on 13 March.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based 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.

In Geneva, UN urges upholding human rights amid rising populism and extremism

27 February 2017 – Disregard for human rights is a disease, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today told the opening session of the UN Human Rights Council, urging Member States to uphold the rights of all people in the face of rising populism and extremism.

Addressing the top UN human rights body for the first time since becoming Secretary-General, Mr. Guterres appealed to world governments to speak up for human rights in an impartial way.

Disregard for human rights is a disease, and it is a disease that is spreading North, South, East and West, the Secretary-General told the high-level segment of the 34th regular session of the Human Rights Council, alongside UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. The Human Rights Council must be part of the cure.

Having lived under the dictatorship of Portugal's António de Oliveira Salazar, Mr. Guterres explained that he was 24 before he knew democracy. Denying his compatriots their human rights had oppressed and impoverished many of them, resulting in a mass exodus, and also brought bloody civil wars to Portugal's former colonies in Africa.

Calling today's world more dangerous, less predictable, more chaotic, the Secretary-General called for making prevention a priority, tackling root causes of conflict and reacting early and more effectively to human rights violations.

He highlighted the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the treaties that derive from it, and urged the Council to be fully engaged on the issues that require their attention.

We are increasingly seeing the perverse phenomenon of populism and extremism feeding off each other in a frenzy of growing racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and other forms of intolerance, Mr.

Guterres said.

Minorities, indigenous communities and others face discriminations and abuse across the world, he added, noting abuse targeting refugees and migrants, and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or intersex (LGBTI).

Among other issues raised, Mr. Guterres also called for protection of the human rights defenders and of journalists who are essential to the checks and balances of any society.

In his address, UN High Commissioner Zeid denounced reckless political profiteers who threaten the multilateral system or intend to withdraw from parts of it.

We have much to lose, so much to protect, the UN High Commissioner said.

Without a commitment to fundamental human rights, to the dignity and worth of the human person and to the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, our world will become chaos, misery and warfare, he warned. Of all the great post-war achievements, it is this assertion of the universality of rights in human rights law that may be the most noteworthy.

Speaking directly to the political actors, Mr. Zeid said the sirens of historical experience ought to ring clear and pledged that we will not sit idly by in the face of violations.

Our rights, the rights of others, the very future of our planet cannot, must not be thrown aside by these reckless political profiteers, he added.

For his part, the President of the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly, Peter Thomson, called for greater dialogue and cooperation for peace among Governments, the UN system, civil society and the private sector.

He lauded the Human Rights Council as essential to bridging divides, and called for advancing with common purpose towards sustainable peace.

Just as the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda recognizes human rights as a cornerstone for sustainable development, so too does the concept of sustaining peace, stated Mr. Thompson, urging the Council members to put forward their best ideas, well-honed skills and most determined will to defend the place of human rights in the drive to implement sustainable development and sustaining peace in today's challenging times.

Kosovo: Talks between Belgrade and Pristina are 'essential' to peace, UN envoy tells Security Council

27 February 2017 – There is no alternative to dialogue, the head of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Kosovo today told the Security Council, citing the importance of high-level talks between Belgrade and Pristina, and calling for continued international engagement to maintain peace and stability in Kosovo and the wider Balkans region.

Addressing the Council, Zahir Tanin, the head of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) said the resumption of high-level dialogue between Belgrade, and Pristina was an "essential step" to chart a path out of a deteriorating situation and to publicly reconfirm their commitment to work together.

"Stability in Kosovo, normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade, are part of the wider effort to improve stability in the Western Balkans," said Mr. Tanin, who is also the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Kosovo.

He urged the 15 Council's members to "hold leaders to their words" to maintain "a sincere and consistent" commitment to dialogue, implement the agreements reached and avoid making statements which threaten the potential of progress to be made.

Mr. Tanin also highlighted also the international expectations of Pristina and Belgrade: non-confrontation, resolving issues through dialogue, and placing the objective improvement of the lives of people ahead of more limited and parochial calculations.

The statement comes as Belgrade is engaged in a political campaign for the presidential elections scheduled for April.

The senior UN official warned against allowing electoral politics to disrupt vital processes and progress: "Normalization of relations, reconciliation, and justice all belong to that broader horizon."

Among other issues in his presentation to the Council, Mr. Tanin noted the importance of improving the social and economic situation in Kosovo. He underlined that "addressing unemployment, making progress in the rule of law and fighting corruption remain central for all people in Kosovo."

At the very start of his speech, Mr. Tanin expressed his profound sadness at the passing of Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, the Representative of Russia to the United Nations, who died suddenly last week.

Families report skyrocketing food prices, dire conditions in western Mosul – UN agency

27 February 2017 – The United Nations food relief agency today said it is extremely concerned about the humanitarian situation facing more than 750,000 people living in dire conditions in the western sections of Iraq's Mosul city, where fighting is taking place between the Government forces and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorists.

"We are hearing from some families that food has drastically risen in price and is unaffordable. In extreme cases, people cannot access food at all," said the World Food Programme's (WFP) Iraq Representative and Country Director, Sally Haydock, in a news release.

"We appeal to all parties to the conflict to facilitate immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access to all Iraqis in need of assistance," Ms. Haydock added, noting that WFP is monitoring the frontlines and remains ready to provide immediate food assistance as soon as families can be reached safely.

Through telephone interviews, many distressed families said that food was unaffordable, while others said they could not access food at all.

"The situation is unbelievable," reported a 46-year-old man from inside the city. "There is no food, no clean water, no gas for heating, no medicine and no services."

So far, WFP has provided ready-to-eat food for over 6,000 people who have fled villages to the south of western Mosul. Most have made their way to Hamam Al Alil, Qayyarah Jeda'a and Haj Ali camps. WFP has enough food in stock to cover the immediate needs of 770,000 people who reside in western Mosul.

The military offensive to oust ISIL from Mosul began on 17 October 2016. The Government has since retaken eastern Mosul.

In related news, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported that alongside its partners, it has provided legal assistance to help more than two and a half thousand Iraqis displaced as a result of the Mosul offensive receive new civil identity cards and other documents that were lost, damaged or destroyed as they fled their homes seeking safety.

As many as 49 per cent of displaced Iraqis interviewed by UNHCR protection partners were found to need help in getting new civil documentation, as many families lost documents or had their papers damaged as they fled conflict.

zones. Other families were told that birth and marriage documents, which had been issued when their areas were under the control of armed groups, were not legally recognized by the Iraqi Government and needed replacement.

It took considerable time and effort to help displaced families with new documentation,” said Bruno Geddo, UNHCR's Representative in Iraq. Our teams and partners have had to adopt some innovative methods and advocate tirelessly in order to get around some of the difficulties and lengthy bureaucratic requirements”, he said, citing the agency's ongoing efforts to assist thousands of people who have been in “legal limbo.”

Western Sahara: UN chief Guterres urges Morocco and Polisario Front to de-escalate tensions in buffer strip

25 February 2017 – Deeply concerned about increased tensions in the vicinity of Guerguerat in the buffer strip in southern Western Sahara between the Moroccan berm and the Mauritanian border, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today called on Morocco and Frente Polisario to “take all necessary steps” to avoid escalation.

According to a statement issued by UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric, armed elements of both Morocco and Frente Polisario (Polisario Front) remain in close proximity to each other, a position they have been in since August 2016, monitored during daylight hours by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

“The Secretary-General calls on both of the parties to exercise maximum restraint and take all necessary steps to avoid escalating tensions, be that through the actions of military or civilian actors,” the statement said, adding that Mr. Guterres also underlined that regular commercial traffic should not be obstructed and that no action should be taken, which may constitute a change to the status quo of the buffer strip.

Strongly urging the parties to unconditionally withdraw all armed elements from the buffer strip as soon as possible, to create an environment conducive to a resumption of the dialogue in the context of the political process led by the UN, the Spokesman said Mr. Guterres further called on the parties to adhere to their obligations under the ceasefire agreement and to respect both the letter and the spirit of it.

Western Sahara is located on the north-west coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. The colonial administration of Western Sahara by Spain ended in 1976. Fighting later broke out between Morocco and

the Polisario Front. A ceasefire was signed in September 1991. MINURSO was deployed that year to monitor the ceasefire between the Government of Morocco and the Polisario Front and organizing, if the parties agree, a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara.

A revised settlement plan was proposed by the United Nations after seven years of diplomatic consultations was rejected by one of the parties in 2004. In approving the current phase of direct negotiations in 2007, the UN Security Council called for "a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political settlement which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."