

Guinea-Bissau: Sustaining economic growth requires political stability, says UN envoy

14 February 2017 – In the face of continued political crisis in Guinea-Bissau, a more sustained and well-coordinated approach is required to sustain economic gains, said the United Nations envoy for the country, calling for “faithful” implementation of a regionally-brokered road-map.

“Any breakthrough in the political dialogue would remain short-lived if the structural causes of the instability are not addressed,” Modibo Touré, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Guinea Bissau, told the UN Security Council today.

“It will therefore be critical for national actors to implement the provisions in the Conakry Agreement related to the review of the Constitution in order to clarify the provisions that have given rise to inter-institutional conflicts in the past,” he added in his briefing, parts of which were in French.

The Conakry Agreement was signed in October last year following talks between political leaders, civil society and religious leaders of Guinea-Bissau. The talks were hosted by the regional bloc Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) in Guinea’s capital Conakry.

However, the implementation of the Agreement and the ECOWAS roadmap has been challenging, Mr. Touré outlined.

Urging authorities of Guinea-Bissau to focus on revising the electoral law and the laws governing political parties, as envisaged in the Conakry Agreement, in preparation for legislative elections scheduled in 2018, the UN official also underlined that “at the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the critical reforms in the judicial, human rights, security and economic sectors.”

Despite political crisis, country’s economic performance has been remarkable

Further in the briefing, Mr. Touré highlighted that the national economy was estimated to have expanded by five per cent in 2016, on the back of very good cashew harvests and favourable terms of trade.

The growth last year follows favourable growth rates in 2015 and 2014.

He, however, added that sustaining the economic growth would require stability.

Furthermore, the Government successfully paid salary arrears of several months particularly in the health and education sectors. There was also progress in fostering national reconciliation and social cohesion, as

evidenced in a recent symposium organized at the premises of the National Assembly and attended by the country's President.

Mr. Touré also pointed out that in the absence of a fully functioning Government, the UN and international financial institutions must continue to coordinate efforts towards mitigating risks, reducing socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including through business for peace initiatives.

In pursuit of this objective, he said that the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS), that he heads, is currently working to take forward a partnership initiative with the UNCT, the World Bank, and other interested bilateral and multilateral partners to effectively strengthen local resilience and promote peace in Guinea-Bissau, in line with relevant the Security Council resolution on a more integrated political, security and developmental approach to sustaining peace.

In Oman, UN chief Guterres seeks ways to help bring peace to Middle East

14 February 2017 – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres today expressed his support for the countries like Oman that are in the forefront of mediation efforts to resolve conflict.

"This is my first visit to the region and the objective is to be able to consult the Government of Oman to see how I can be useful, recognizing that it's Member States and the people that have the leadership in bringing peace to the region," Mr. Guterres told the press, following a meeting with Oman's foreign minister, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah.

"How I can be useful in supporting all those like Oman, who has always been in the first line of mediation trying to bring together the parties to the conflict and trying to make sure that peace is possible?" the UN chief said.

On the conflict in Yemen, Mr. Guterres said that, known the Yemeni people for a long time, he wishes to be able to serve and support the efforts of all those who want peace to be re-established in Yemen. "They are a generous people who are suffering so much," he said.

The Secretary-General is on his first major trip, which took him to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). From Oman, he will travel to Qatar, Egypt and Germany.

Synthetic drugs are making headway in Afghanistan, UN agency reports

14 February 2017 – Methamphetamine is increasingly being seized by law enforcement in Afghanistan, and there is also evidence that it is being produced in the country, according to the first of its kind assessment on synthetic drugs released today by the United Nations drug and crime agency.

After spending eight-months gathering information on drugs known locally as 'glass,' 'tears of love' or 'sheesha,' the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) concluded that "there are strong indications that methamphetamine use is establishing itself among opiate users, which are already one of the most vulnerable parts of Afghan society."

"The report comes in a timely fashion, adding another layer of understanding to the very complex Afghan drugs situation," said UNODC's Director of Public Affairs, Jean-Luc Lemahieu.

He praised Afghan contribution to the report, noting that the country has had "impressive" growth in capacity.

The Afghanistan Synthetic Drugs Assessment includes missions to five provinces in Afghanistan, where interviews were conducted with over 100 key sources, drug users and law enforcement officials at government offices, health service centres and drug treatment providers.

"Although data and information remains scarce, reports from law enforcement officials, drug treatment providers, forensic experts and drug users in Afghanistan point to a differentiated market for synthetic drug," the investigators reported.

Source: UNODC's Afghanistan Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment

"Increases in the number of methamphetamine seizures, together with reports of methamphetamine manufacture and increases in treatment registrations in certain parts of the country, suggest that synthetic drugs are of growing concern in Afghanistan," says the report.

Among its findings, the report noted that the largest number of methamphetamine treatment registrations have been reported by treatment centres in Kunduz province, in the north-east of Afghanistan, and Nimroz province, to the south-west of Afghanistan.

It also found that the current national drug control law seems to provide a much lower penalty framework for methamphetamine compared to other drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

Investigators conclude that the issue must be studied more thoroughly by

national and international partners.

Drought drives food price spike in East Africa, UN warns

14 February 2017 – East Africa's ongoing drought has sharply curbed harvests and drive up the prices of cereals and other staple foods to unusually high levels, posing a heavy burden to households and special risks for pastoralists in the region, the United Nations agricultural agency said today.

"Sharply increasing prices are severely constraining food access for large numbers of households with alarming consequences in terms of food insecurity," said Mario Zappacosta, a senior economist for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in a news release.

Local prices of maize, sorghum and other cereals are near or at record levels in swathes of Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, according to the latest Food Price Monitoring and Analysis Bulletin (FPMA).

Poor livestock body conditions due to pasture and water shortages and forcible culls mean animals command lower prices, leaving pastoralists with even less income to purchase basic foodstuffs.

Somalia's maize and sorghum harvests are estimated to be 75 per cent down from their usual level. In Tanzania, maize prices in Arusha, Tanzania, have almost doubled since early 2016.

In South Sudan, food prices are now two to four times above their levels of a year earlier, while in Kenya, maize prices are up by around 30 per cent.

Beans now cost 40 per cent more in Kenya than a year earlier, while in Uganda, the prices of beans and cassava flour are both about 25 per cent higher than a year ago in the capital city, Kampala.

Drought-affected pastoral areas in the region face even harsher conditions. In Somalia, goat prices are up to 60 per cent lower than a year ago, while in pastoralist areas of Kenya the prices of goats declined by up to 30 per cent over the last 12 months.

Shortages of pasture and water caused livestock deaths and reduced body mass, prompting herders to sell animals while they can, as is also occurring in drought-wracked southern Ethiopia. This also pushes up the prices of milk, which is, for instance, up 40 per cent on the year in Somalia's Gedo region.

Reported killing of more than 100 people by soldiers in DR Congo could constitute excessive use of force – UN rights arm

14 February 2017 – At least 101 people are reported to have been killed by soldiers in clashes between military forces and members of the Kamuina Nsapu militia in central Democratic Republic of the Congo over the last five days, the United Nations human rights wing has said.

Some 39 individuals among those killed in the violence between 9-13 February were women, caught in the shooting, when Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) soldiers opened fire indiscriminately with machine guns when they saw militia fighters, Liz Throssell, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told the media at the bi-weekly news briefing at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG), citing information received from several sources.

The militia members were reportedly armed mainly with machetes and spears.

“We are deeply concerned at the reported high number of deaths, which if confirmed would suggest excessive and disproportionate use of force by the soldiers,” said Ms. Throssell, noting that the UN Joint Human Rights Office is seeking to verify the exact number of victims.

Calling on the FARDC soldiers to abide by standards under national law and international human rights law in their responses and urged the military commanders to reinforce this message with their troops, she added:

“In particular to exercise restraint and to use force only when necessary and proportionate to the threat, to minimize damage and injury and to respect and preserve human lives.”

According to OHCHR, this latest violence “said to have occurred in and around the town of Tshimbulu in DR Congo’s Kasai Central Province” follows “atrocities committed by both sides it has documented since August last year, when a customary chief (after whom the Kamuina Nsapu militia is named) was killed by the armed forces.”

Calling on the authorities for a full and independent investigation into the latest violence, the UN human rights office offered its support to investigations into others allegations of serious human rights violations and abuses committed in the context of the ongoing conflict in Kasai Central Province by the FARDC and the militia.

Given the ongoing violence, we also reiterate our call for increased efforts to find durable solutions to conflicts with customary chiefs in Kasai Central Province," said Ms. Throssell.