

UN envoy calls for urgent measures to protect ceasefire in Syria

25 March 2017 – Voicing deep concern over recent escalation of fighting in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy for the country has urged Iran, Russia and Turkey to undertake urgent efforts to uphold the ceasefire which has been in effect since late December last year.

“Growing violations in recent days are undermining the ceasefire regime addressed through the Astana meetings, with significant negative consequences for the safety of Syrian civilians, humanitarian access and the momentum of the political process,” said UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

According to a note to correspondents issued today, Mr. de Mistura sent letters to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran – as the three guarantor-States of the ceasefire – to undertake urgent efforts to uphold it.

These appeals were also brought to the attention of Russia and the United States as the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the note added.

The ceasefire came into effect on 30 December last year, but recent fighting in capital Damascus, Hama and elsewhere in Syria have put it under strain.

Also in the note, Mr. de Mistura noted that joint efforts of Iran, Russia and Turkey to guarantee the ceasefire “are indispensable for improving the conditions on the ground and contributing to an environment conducive for a productive political progress”.

PHOTO FEATURE: The enduring legacy of the transatlantic slave trade

24 March 2017 – The transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in history and undeniably one of the most inhumane. According to the United Nations, over a 400-year period, the forcible extraction of Africans from their motherland was unprecedented in the annals of recorded human history

In 2007, the General Assembly declared 25 March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, to be observed annually.

The Day offers an opportunity to honour those who suffered at the hands of

the brutal slavery system. It also aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today.



: Annual Global Student Video Conference Commemorating Victims of Slavery.
Photo: UN Photo/Manuel Elias

This year the theme “Remember Slavery: Recognising the Legacy and Contributions of People of African Descent” recognises the horrors of the slave trade, while acknowledging that it led to an unprecedented transfer of knowledge and culture from Africa to the Americas, Europe and elsewhere.

Enslaved Africans brought with them advanced techniques of farming, working metals such as gold and iron, and boat building, among others. Those skills need to be remembered and celebrated.

“This is a story that has shaped almost every culture of the world,” Dr. Lonnie G. Bunch III, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture told UN News.

Visitor’s take in “A Legacy of Black Achievement,” an exhibit at the UN featuring 21 figures who have personified the vital contributions that Africans and their descendants have made globally – from science and technology to political activism and the arts. Photo: UN News/ Elizabeth Scaffidi

This commemoration also acknowledges the enduring contributions of the vibrant African diaspora, which continue to enrich cultures across the globe.

Through music, dance, spirituality, sport, literature, art and cuisine, the diaspora has enabled societies to advance in science, technology, business, politics, law, social justice and international diplomacy, to name just a few.

The theme for this year’s International Day appropriately invites us to appreciate and honour the diaspora’s tremendous achievements.

Looking back to move forward

According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Island of Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, was the largest trading centre of slaves from the African coast.



The island of Gorée lies off the coast of Senegal, opposite Dakar. Photo: UNESCO/Richard Veillon

On the Island of Gorée, the architecture of the House of Slaves and its Door of No Return is characterized by the contrast between the dark slave quarters and the elegant houses of the slave traders. In 1962, it became a museum to memorialize the final exit point of the slaves from Africa. Today, the island is a symbol of human exploitation and a sanctuary for reconciliation.



‘The Ark of Return’ honours the memories of the estimated 15 million men, women and children who were victims of the forced extraction. Photo: UN News/UN/Elizabeth Scaffidi

FEATURE: Cuba’s rich musical heritage rooted in African rhythm

24 March 2017 – For over 400 years, more than 15 million men, women and children were the victims of the tragic transatlantic slave trade – one of the darkest chapters in human history – commemorated by the United Nations every year on 25 March, the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Besides honouring and remembering those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, and to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today, the day is also an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of the enslaved people to the societies in which they found themselves during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, with valuable skills and useful knowledge that they brought with them.

Among them, were the rhythms and musical traditions from their homeland, which, according to historical experts attending an African Diaspora musical event at the UN on 14 April 2016, were essential to their survival and maintaining their identity.

As one travels through the African Diaspora, music and dance considered to be indigenous, is largely reminiscent of the African continent, as one may discover on a visit to countries like Cuba.

VIDEO: When Africans were brought centuries ago to Cuba to work on the sugar plantations, they also brought their cultural traditions including their music and instruments. When they arrived on the island, they embraced the tempo of the indigenous population and mixed it with their own African beat. Now young people are keeping the music of the enslaved alive in their own creations. *Credit: UNDP LAC*

Here, Joon Park, UNTV videographer and editor, gives his unique first person

account of what it was like to report the story of Afro-Cuban music during a time of national mourning.

“Viva Fidel!” A middle aged man proudly shouted at our backs as we walked away after asking for directions. UNTV Producer, Mary Ferreira, and I were in Havana, Cuba, but it wasn’t just any ordinary day in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean Island nation. It was the day after Cuba lost its revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro and the city had come to a screeching halt.



The streets were filled with people weeping, paying tribute, and flaunting Fidel’s photo everywhere. The air was heavy with grief and uncertainty – sometimes almost too silent as a nine-day period of national mourning began. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

As part of the United Nations’ Decade for People of African Descent campaign, we were in Cuba to document the influence that enslaved Africans and their descendants have on the island nation’s iconic music.

Experts estimate that more than 1.3 million slaves were brought to Cuba from across different regions of Africa. Their culture and religion, which are still present everywhere in the country, left a deep imprint on the island. To honor and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, the United Nations designated 25, March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The day aims to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice.



Images of the late Fidel Casto are projected on a building surrounding Revolution Square in Havana during the nine day period of mourning after his death on 25, November, 2016. Photo: UNTV/ Joon Park

Like any other filming assignment, we knew to expect the unexpected – but this was different. The news of Castro’s death broke shortly before we boarded our flight and the number of international journalists at the airport indicated the weight of the historic news.

The quick turn of events posed a major obstacle for our production schedule. The Cuban government placed a ban on public entertainment during the mourning period which meant no live music playing throughout the nation for nine days.

Ferreira, my seasoned producer, swiftly changed course and pushed back filming of musicians to the following week and after much struggle and anxious waiting, we met an intriguing musician named, Ramon Garcia. He led an Afro-Cuban band called “Vocal Baobob.”



Ramon Garcia’s front porch becomes a stage for neighbours to play their Afro-

Cuban music. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

He openly gave us an invitation to his home where his band members regularly met and practiced. The ban was finally lifted and on the way to Mr. Garcia's house our driver, Mondí, cranked up the volume on his car stereo.

"I try to connect it with Africa," Mr. Garcia said. "There is no way that I would compose a song without a little bit of African rhythm."

Within minutes his friends started to arrive; one with drumsticks in his pocket, the other with the African shekere (a West African percussion instrument made of dried gourd with beads woven into a net). Among them was Garcia's cousin, Blanco, a contemporary hip hop rapper.

Blanco presented his latest work and Mr. Garcia quickly pulled out the batá drums. The batá drums are known as the sacred drums of Cuba, which were only played for the kings and for religious rituals in Africa.



Mr. Garcia plays the batá drums while his cousin, Blanco (right), raps his new song. Photo: Joon Park / UNTV

The front porch now became a stage as I readied my camera. The modern hip hop beat blasted out from the speakers. Slowly and naturally, like laying bricks, Mr. Garcia added the batá drum rhythm, another added the African shekere while the others started humming.

The all too familiar sound of contemporary hip hop was transformed into a mixture of African and Cuban melodies. And the first phrase of the song went, "Gracias Fidel!"

[Outgoing UN peacekeeping chief praises reduced cost of operations, as agility increases](#)

24 March 2017 – United Nations peacekeeping is becoming more agile and capable, the outgoing chief today said, even as the cost for each peacekeeper fell 16 per cent in recent years, dropping the entire budget of the blue helmets worldwide to around \$7.2 billion.

"It's a lot of money at face value, but it's 0.4 per cent of world military expenditure," Hervé Ladsous, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, told journalists in New York during his final briefing in this

post.

"No other army has done what the United Nations has done over the past six years," he added. The price for UN peacekeeping operations is currently \$7.2 billion, down from \$8.2 billion in 2011. "We diminished the cost per peacekeeper by 16 per cent without any diminution in the level of equipment."

Comparing UN costs with the price tag for similar operations done by Governments alone, Mr. Ladsous said the UN operation cost was one-quarter of such operations.

Even as the costs have decreased, the agility and capacities of UN peacekeeping has strengthened, Mr. said Ladsous.

For example, the UN will shortly have a permanent capacity to deploy a vanguard brigade within 30 to 60 days, a "very useful" improvement over the current six to eight months to deploy a unit.

Technological advances, such as surveillance drones, balloons and cameras, are helping to bring "peacekeeping into the 21st century"

Another example of progress cited by Mr. Ladsous is the work under way to create a framework policy on intelligence which will save lives and allow peacekeepers "to do a better job."

Technological advances, such as surveillance drones, balloons and cameras, are helping to bring "peacekeeping into the 21st century," Mr. Ladsous added.

The geographic makeup of the peacekeepers is also changing, with an increased number of units from the so-called Global North, which incorporates countries from North America and Europe, as opposed to the Global South, which consists of South America, Asia and Africa.

"When I can in in 2011, 95 per cent of peacekeepers were from the Global South," said Mr. Ladsous. "Now we have more countries from the Global North, from Europe, the European Union, in Mali and in Central Africa."

Another key aspect of change in peacekeeping is their ability to adapt to the situation in each country and in creating exit strategies "because missions are not eternal," Mr. Ladsous said.

He noted that three peacekeeping operations – in Côte D'Ivoire, Haiti and Liberia – are expected to close down this year.

'Peacekeeping is about political solutions'

Despite the evolution of peacekeeping, its operations are often hampered by ongoing challenges, Mr. Ladsous noted. These include deployments to countries where there is no political process.

"Peacekeeping is about political solutions. The visible part is the soldiers,

the uniforms, the policemen, but the reality is that we're there to serve a political solution and quite often, it was the case in Mali initially, it was the case in CAR [Central African Republic] initially, there was no political solution in sight," he said.

The Security Council "is not always as supportive as it should be" in such circumstances, nor in instances where UN 'blue helmets' should be sent.

One of the greatest challenges, however, is managing expectations of UN Member States, donor countries and other actors.

"The heart of the mandate is about protection of civilians. This is an extremely difficult issue. Yet we cannot have a peacekeeper behind every single citizen in the theatre," said Mr. Ladsous.

While it is difficult to quantify, UN peacekeeping saves lives, the outgoing chief said. Pointing to South Sudan, where he just visited with the incoming chief, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Mr. Ladsous said the UN saved at least 220,000 lives in South Sudan alone.

Among other issues discussed in his final press briefing was the recent sexual exploitation and abuse report, asymmetrical attacks on peacekeepers, and uncooperative Governments hosting peacekeeping operations.

INTERVIEW: Amid increased suffering, responsibility to protect all the more necessary – UN Special Adviser

24 March 2017 – In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the outcome of the World Summit in which it, inter alia, underscored that each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

In addition to the State's responsibility, the General Assembly also highlighted that the international community, too, has the responsibility to use appropriate means in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the UN Charter – the chapters dealing with peaceful settlement of disputes and regional arrangements – to help to protect populations from such crimes.

Within the UN system, the Secretary-General has designated a senior official to serve as his Special Adviser and to support both the organization and UN Member States in implementing the principle as well as in fulfilling the obligation.

The current Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect is Ivan

Šimonovic who assumed the office in October last year.

Prior to his appointment, Mr. Šimonovic served as the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, heading the New York office of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (July 2010 to September 2016). He has also published extensively in the fields of law and human rights.

UN News spoke with Mr. Šimonovic on the progress made by the international community since the adoption of the principle of Responsibility to Protect, the challenges it is facing at the moment, and his role.

***UN News:* Can you briefly talk about your mandate and role; why do we need the Responsibility to Protect?**

Ivan Šimonovic: I am the Special Adviser of the United Nations Secretary-General for Responsibility to Protect. My mandate is to develop 'Responsibility to Protect' conceptually, politically as well as operationally.

This means clarifying what the principle really is. It means gathering political support for Responsibility to Protect and discussing the ways how it should be implemented and what mechanisms should be used.

Responsibility to Protect is very much needed to protect populations from the worst of all crimes – protect them from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Unfortunately, I have to say that those so-called “atrocity crimes” are on the rise. Therefore activating the Responsibility to Protect – not only speaking about the commitments but also implementing it in practice is hugely important.

***UN News:* Since the adoption of Responsibility to Protect in the outcome of the 2005 World Summit, what major progress has been made by the international community on fulfilling the principles?**

Ivan Šimonovic: There has been quite a lot of progress in the sense of conceptual development of Responsibility to Protect, such as through the Secretary-General's yearly reports and informal interactive debates. It has been clarified what Responsibility to Protect means.

It means that UN Member States are obliged to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. However if a State is unable to do it itself, it is the obligation of other States to provide assistance and support to the State that is under stress.

But if all these efforts do not work, if the State manifestly fails to protect populations or the State itself targets the population, then it is the obligation of other States to act collectively through the Security Council to protect populations.



Women wait with children to be examined at a mobile clinic run in the village of Rubkuai, Unity State, South Sudan. Photo: UNICEF/Modola

UN News: What are the biggest challenges at the moment?

Ivan Šimonovic: The biggest challenge is implementation.

We have seen from 2005 until now, many interactive dialogues, UN Member States expressing commitment, we have also seen Security Council as well as Human Rights Council resolutions having specific provisions dealing with Responsibility to Protect. More and more peace missions have protection of civilians in their mandate.

These are all [indicators of] progress.

But reality check: we are facing an increase of atrocity crimes and this is very concerning.

UN News: Going forward, how can the Responsibility to Protect agenda be advanced? For instance, what can UN Member States do?

Ivan Šimonovic: What UN Member States not only could, but in my firm belief – should do – is that they should regularly conduct risk assessments of risks of atrocity crimes in their own country, and they should introduce mitigation measures to prevent it from happening.

It is not only the responsibility of the Member State to prevent atrocity crimes and punish those who commit them, if they occur. It is also their obligation to prevent them through a set of measures such as through adequate budget allocations; ensuring their security forces are properly trained, professional, and they know about their obligations in protecting human rights and preventing mass atrocities. There is also a need to ensure that there is no structural discrimination and that there is equal access to justice, so it is a lot to do.

But is also an obligation of Member States who can afford and who have the capacity to help other Member States that have protection gaps to prevent mass atrocities. A very good opportunity to do this is the Universal Periodic Review, which is conducted by the Human Rights Council.

Finally, I think what should also be improved is the Security Council reaction to mass atrocities.

Unfortunately, far too often we have faced situations such as in Syria during which terrible crimes are being committed without adequate reaction because of divisions within the Security Council. So I fully support all initiatives to reduce the veto power in the Council when the issue of atrocity crime is at stake.

As far as peace operations are concerned, we must ensure that their mandates have protection of civilians included. At the same time, adequate means of protection should be provided so that it can work in practice.

UN News: Also, what role can the civil society and other organizations play to help progress the agenda?

Ivan Šimonovic: Responsibility to Protect is defined in outcome document of 2005 World Summit as primarily the obligation of Member States so the civil society in this respect serve as a watch dog – whether the Member States are observing the obligations that they have themselves, free willingly, undertaken.

In practice this could also mean, for example, ahead of the Universal Periodic Review, civil society can submit stakeholder reports emphasizing protection gaps that exist in a country.

Beside this watchdog function, civil society itself can have an active role, it is not obliged by the principle of Responsibility to Protect, because it applies to States, but in the sense of preventing atrocity, especially on a local level, civil society can do a lot in the sense of conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

At the global level, the civil society can work to remind both Member States and the UN of their obligations under Responsibility to Protect.

UN News: In the end, would you like to add anything from your side?

Ivan Šimonovic: I think that in challenging situation, where we are, with atrocity crimes on the rise, all of us – the UN system, Member States, regional organizations and civil society – must work together.

The increase of atrocity crimes is simply unacceptable, we should do more to protect the most vulnerable against horrific crimes, namely: genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.