

Marking World Tuberculosis Day, UN seeks to address stigma, protect patient rights

24 March 2017 – To mark World Tuberculosis Day, the United Nations health agency has launched a new set of ethics guidance to protect the rights of all people affected by the infectious disease, which claims 5,000 lives each day.

New tuberculosis (TB) ethics guidance, launched earlier this week by the World Health Organization (WHO), aims to help ensure that countries implementing anti-TB strategy adhere to sound ethical standards to protect the rights of all those affected.

“TB strikes some of the world’s poorest people hardest,” said WHO Director-General Margaret Chan in a news release.

“WHO is determined to overcome the stigma, discrimination, and other barriers that prevent so many of these people from obtaining the services they so badly need,” she said.

World Tuberculosis Day, celebrated on 24 March each year, is an opportunity to raise awareness about the burden of tuberculosis worldwide and the status of prevention and care efforts.

This is the second year of a two-year Unite to End TB campaign. WHO is placing a special focus on uniting efforts to ‘Leave No One Behind,’ including actions to address stigma, discrimination, marginalization and overcome barriers to access care.

The heaviest burden is carried by communities which already face socio-economic challenges: migrants, refugees, prisoners, ethnic minorities, miners and others working and living in risk-prone settings, and marginalized women, children and older people.



With over 118,000 displaced sheltering in Bentiu, the spread of Tuberculosis in South Sudan is still a concern. Photo: IOM

The new WHO ethics guidance addresses contentious issues such as, the isolation of contagious patients, the rights of TB patients in prison, discriminatory policies against migrants affected by TB, among others. It emphasizes five key ethical obligations for governments, health workers, care providers, nongovernmental organizations, researchers and other stakeholders to:

- provide patients with the social support they need to fulfil their responsibilities;

- refrain from isolating TB patients before exhausting all options to enable treatment adherence and only under very specific conditions;
- enable “key populations” to access same standard of care offered to other citizens;
- ensure all health workers operate in a safe environment; and,
- rapidly share evidence from research to inform national and global TB policy updates.

“Only when evidence-based, effective interventions are informed by a sound ethical framework, and respect for human rights, will we be successful in reaching our ambitious goals of ending the TB epidemic and achieving universal health coverage. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aspiration of leaving no one behind is centred on this,” said WHO Global TB Programme Director Mario Raviglione.

Environmental recovery key to post-conflict development in Colombia – UN agency

24 March 2017 – Concluding a mission to Colombia, a multi-disciplinary team of United Nations environment experts have highlighted that the country has a unique opportunity to promote sustainable and resilient livelihoods in which the nature serves as the foundation for long-lasting peace.

In a news release today, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said that different rebel groups and criminal gangs, which controlled large parts of the country for decades, illegally extracted and exploited natural resources leading to major environmental damage, including illegal cropping, deforestation and the unregulated use of hazardous chemicals.

The UN team’s visit and aerial inspection of the Quito and Atrato rivers uncovered the scale of environmental challenges brought by large scale and mechanized illegal operations.

“The environmental destruction in the Quito river basin is significant in terms of scope and magnitude, due to a combination of illegal mining and deforestation,” read the release.

Also, the release of Mercury (one of the most hazardous chemicals used in mining) into the environment has added significant challenges given the potential that the heavy, toxic, metal can reach the community through air, water and food chain.

The UN team was invited by the Colombian President, Juan Manuel Santos, to identify priority actions towards mitigating the health and livelihood risks from the environmental damage in priority areas for post-conflict development.

"Environment is at the heart of post-conflict development in Colombia," said Leo Heileman, the Director of the UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, noting that the UN agency "will unwaveringly stand by Colombia during the post-conflict phase."

Initial support proposed by UNEP includes technical recommendations and training for the effective implementation of environmental peace-building projects; strategic environmental assessment of key post-conflict interventions; advice on measures to improve social, economic and environmental conditions for the extractive sector and to remediate damage caused by illegal operations; and strengthening of the institutional and technical capacities.

On its part, the Colombian Government emphasized the importance of strengthening the environmental dividends of peace and fostering green growth as pillars for sustainable development, noted the UNEP news release.

Hundreds of thousands trapped in Mosul with 'worst yet to come' – UN agency

24 March 2017 – An estimated 400,000 Iraqi civilians are trapped in Mosul's Old City as fighting intensifies and people continue to flee, the United Nations refugee agency representative today warned.

"The worst is yet to come," said Bruno Geddo, the Representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Iraq.

Speaking by phone, Mr. Geddo said the fighting in the west has been more intense than in the less densely populated east of the city, where the battle ended in January.

"People are stuck between a rock and a hard place," he added. "There's fighting, shelling, bombing."

When people try to flee, extremists shoot them. Some have tried to leave during prayers or under cover of fog at first light but were killed, Mr. Geddo said.

Meanwhile, life in the Old City is becoming impossible with a lack of food, clean water or fuel, Mr. Geddo said.

Meeting with civilians at the UNHCR transit and reception centre at Hammam al-Alil, outside of the city centre, Mr. Geddo said the number of people moving through has surged in recent days with up to 12,000 people arriving daily.

Some 340,000 people have been displaced since the fighting in Mosul started last October. Of those, about 72,000 have returned home.

VIDEO: Desperate to flee fighting, thousands of displaced Iraqis from west Mosul are arriving in Hammam al-Alil camp, a few kilometres south of the city. Many spend their first night in a reception centre awaiting their tents. Others are transferred to nearby camps to reunite with other family members. *Credit: UNHCR*

The UN representative called on all those fighting to allow civilians to leave areas of conflict for safer zones, and no one should be forced to come back home.

“Liberating Mosul is necessary but not sufficient,” Mr. Geddo said. “We equally have to get it right with the protection of civilians and in the humanitarian response.”

Child rights must be at the centre of Syria peace talks – UNICEF

24 March 2017 – Those participating the intra-Syrian peace talks in Geneva must put the rights of children at the centre of all their deliberations as children throughout the Middle Eastern country continue to come under attack, a senior United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) official has said.

“Those meeting in Geneva this week should put the rights of children at the centre of all their deliberations – the right of every boy and girl to be protected, the right to receive life-saving humanitarian assistance no matter where they are and the right to an education,” UNICEF Regional Director Geert Cappelaere said in a said issued yesterday, ahead of the resumption of the Geneva talks.

Citing reports that Wednesday’s attack on a school in Ar-Raqqa which is sheltering internally displaced families has killed 53 civilians including 12 children, he said the international community once again failed the children of Syria. “We have been failing them for more than 2,200 days already,” he added.

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“UNICEF reminds all parties engaged militarily in Syria that it is their responsibility to protect and safeguard the lives of children and their families. Civilian infrastructure including schools and hospitals should be protected, no matter who controls the area,” Mr. Geert said.

He said that children are being deprived of their basic right to life and denied their right to an education.

“All parties to the conflict and those with influence must redouble their efforts to find a political solution to end a conflict that is leaving nothing but death and destruction in its path,” he said.

UN agencies, partners to launch polio vaccination campaign across Africa

24 March 2017 – More than 116 million children are set to be immunized against polio starting tomorrow in one of the largest of its kind synchronized vaccination campaigns across west and central Africa, United Nations agencies today announced.

All children under five years of age in the 13 countries will be simultaneously immunized in a coordinated effort to raise childhood immunity to polio across the continent, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a press release.

Twenty years, ago, “every single country on the continent was endemic to polio, and every year, more than 75 000 children were paralysed for life by this terrible disease. Thanks to the dedication of governments, communities, parents and health workers, this disease is now beaten back to this final reservoir,” said Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

The campaign aims to vaccinate all young children in Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

Of particular concern are the five Lake Chad Basin countries. Four children were paralysed by the disease last year in north-eastern Nigeria where insecurity cut off health access. This area is one of the few where polio is active.

“Polio eradication will be an unparalleled victory, which will not only save all future generations of children from the grip of a disease that is entirely preventable – but will show the world what Africa can do when it unites behind a common goal,” said UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, Marie-Pierre Poirier.

Organizers said that more than 190,000 polio vaccinators will deliver bivalent oral polio vaccine (bOPV) to every house across all cities, towns and villages of the 13 countries.

Volunteers and health workers will work up to 12 hours per day, travelling on foot or bicycle, in often stifling humidity and temperatures in excess of 40°C. Each vaccination team will carry the vaccine in special carrier bags, filled with ice packs to ensure the vaccine remains below the required 8°C, according to the press release.

The polio campaign will run through 28 March.