

Somalia: UN mission condemns Al-Shabaab attack on popular Mogadishu hotel

25 January 2017 – The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) has condemned the coordinated suicide bombing attack earlier today at a hotel in Mogadishu for which Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility and which reportedly killed dozens of people.

According to the United Nations, the attack, on the Dayah Hotel (known locally as the Dayax), reportedly killed dozens of Somali civilians and soldiers, while wounding many more. The hotel is located near the Presidential palace and is frequently visited by lawmakers in the capital.

In an interview with *UN News*, Joseph Contreras, the spokesperson for the Mission, said the attack provides fresh evidence of the violent extremists' desperate attempts to derail Somalia's electoral process. Moreover it reflects the terrorists' frustration over their inability to sabotage the recent voting for seats in the two Houses of Somalia's new Parliament.

As for the scene on the ground, he pointed out that first responders arrived at the hotel targeted by the attack "quite quickly and brought the situation under control."

"The latest figures that we have been seeing range from between 15 and 20 dead, some of whom were the attackers themselves, some of them Somali soldiers," Mr. Contreras said, adding that perhaps about half of were civilians and among the dozens of injured were at least 5 journalists. He was not aware if any lawmakers were visiting the hotel.

UN relief official urges calm amid fears of fresh violence in Central African Republic town

25 January 2017 – Amid rising tensions in Central African Republic's Ouaka prefecture and in and around its town of Bambari, a senior UN humanitarian official in the country has appealed for calm and refraining from any act that could further increase the fragility of an already vulnerable population.

"With a population of 42,000 and more than 26,000 displaced people, an open

conflict in Bambari would be devastating to the civilian population,” said Michel Yao, the Acting Humanitarian Coordinator in the country.

Calling on all armed groups and non-State actors to realize the impact of a violent confrontation on the already sensitive situation of the local population, Dr. Yao added: “The likelihood of such a conflict suggests a dangerous increased in the fragility of the displaced population whose vulnerability remains a source of concern in several aspects.”

Further, urging armed and non-State groups not to jeopardize the achievements of the last two years in terms of reconciliation and social cohesion, as well as the improvement in the humanitarian situation, Dr. Yao encouraged and supported all efforts from the UN mission in the country, known by the French acronym MINUSCA, the international community and national authorities to avoid clashes that could threaten the protection of the civilians.

People in and around Bambari, located some 385 kilometres (about 240 miles) north east of the nation’s capital Bangui, have already suffered the consequences of several waves of violence by armed groups.

Additionally, since the start of conflict Bria – the capital of the neighbouring Haute-Kotto prefecture – last September, more than 18,000 newly displaced persons have arrived in the Ouaka prefecture, which borders the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In Bambari town, there more than 300 newly displaced from the Bambari-Ippy-Bria axis, all in dire need of relief.

“I call on all parties to the conflict to ensure the unimpeded humanitarian access to the vulnerable groups of people by the humanitarians and vice versa” noted Dr. Yao.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country of 4.5 million people into civil conflict in 2013. According to the UN, more more than half the population is in dire need of assistance. Despite significant progress and successful elections, CAR has remained in the grip of instability and sporadic unrest.

In December 2016, the Mission supported a new dialogue between 11 of the 14 armed groups, as part of an ongoing effort to disarm the factions.

Fighting impunity is the best way to protect Mexico’s human rights

defenders – UN expert

25 January 2017 – A United Nations rights expert expressed concern today about widespread impunity for crimes against human rights defenders in Mexico, noting that the situation is inducing more violations.

“The failure to investigate and sanction aggressors has signalled a dangerous message that there are no consequences for committing such crimes. This creates an environment conducive to repetition of violations,” warned Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur with a mandate to monitor and report on the promotion and protection of defenders in the world.

Mr. Forst visited Mexico from 16 to 24 January 2017, crisscrossing from Mexico City to the states of Chihuahua, Guerrero, Oaxaca and State of Mexico. He met with more than 800 human rights defenders from 24 states, 60 per cent of whom were women.

Noting the “elevated levels of insecurity and violence facing them in the country” in the complex context of organized crime, corruption in the country, and State repression, he warned that “impunity has become both the cause and the effect of the overall insecurity of human rights defenders in Mexico.”

“Impunity feeds criminalization of defenders, which in turn fuels fear among broader civil society, undermining the general aspirations for human rights and the rule of law,” said Mr. Forst in a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). “For human rights defenders, the best protection they could have is when justice is served and perpetrators are held accountable.”

On the final day of his visit, the expert delivered a preliminary report with a series of recommendations to the Mexican authorities and other actors to improve the protection of human rights defenders and enable their important work.

“Only by joining efforts will Mexico be able to overcome the serious situation in which defenders are carrying out their work, which is core to a democratic society,” he stressed.

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.

Cambodia: UN experts call for immediate release of five human rights defenders

25 January 2017 – Two United Nations human rights experts today called on the Government of Cambodia for the immediate release of five human rights defenders detained in May 2016 on charges, which they see as politically motivated.

The use of criminal provisions as a pretext to suppress and prevent the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression and to silence human rights defenders is incompatible with article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICCPR), which has been signed by Cambodia, said the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Rhona Smith, in a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Ms. Smith recalled that, on 11 May 2016, a group of UN human rights experts sent a follow-up joint urgent appeal to the Cambodian Government on the cases of the five detainees, but has not received any response to date.

The experts requested detailed information on the legal basis for the detention of four staff of human rights NGO Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) Lim Mony, Ny Vanda, Ny Sokha and Yi Soksan as well as the Deputy Secretary General of the National Election Committee and former ADHOC staff member, Ny Chakrya.

As a party to the ICCPR, Cambodia is obliged to respect freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial, which entails a prompt and fair trial within a reasonable period of time or release, Ms. Smith stressed.

With so much effort and resources invested in improving the functioning of the judiciary, which had begun to see improvements in some respects, all that is lost with these cases, she cautioned. They have damaged even further the standing of the Cambodian judiciary, which according to studies commands the least respect of the public among all the State institutions.

The Special Rapporteur's call was also endorsed by human rights expert Sètondji Roland Adjovi, who currently heads the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

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PHOTO FEATURE: Mosul under siege – 100 days on, and the UN's humanitarian response

24 January 2017 – Armed conflict in Iraq has caused the displacement of more than three million people since June 2014 – one million of those displaced may be as a direct result of the Iraqi military's efforts to liberate Mosul and surrounding areas from the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

One hundred days into the Iraqi military operation, people continue to be exposed to violence, human rights violations, restricted access to safety and freedom of movement, abduction and illegal detention, limited access to basic services. As well, many lack of the documentation necessary to enjoy their basic rights.

Before and after the start of the military operation, United Nations agencies rallied efforts to assist civilians with a range of targeted services, from distributing much-needed relief supplies, such as food and health care, to providing shelter and other humanitarian assistance.

Since 17 October 2016, when the Iraqi military operation to retake Mosul began, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has tracked the movements of more than 26,873 displaced families – 161,238 individuals – the majority of whom desperately need life-saving humanitarian assistance.

Emergency supplies are desperately needed. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is providing food, water and hygiene items to displaced families – these supplies include water purification tablets, high energy biscuits, jerry cans, baby hygiene kits and leaflets with information on child protection and basic mine awareness.

Knowing what is needed and when is crucial for helping those most in need in a timely fashion. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is monitoring the situation on the ground, and providing updates on funding and the humanitarian response – including gaps and constraints on camp coordination and management; shelter and non-food items; food security; health; water, sanitation and hygiene; education; logistics; and emergency telecommunications.

Providing those in need with the right sustenance to survive falls under the responsibility of the World Food Programme (WFP), which has been providing monthly food rations and ready-to-eat food to the affected people. These food rations contain items such as rice, lentils, wheat flour, bulgur wheat, beans and vegetable oil.

The need for impartial respect and protection of human rights is crucial in Iraq to ensure that, among other things, women and children are protected from sexual and gender-based violence and diverse ethnic and religious minorities and persons with disabilities are granted access to basic services without discrimination. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has a human rights unit that works with the authorities and members of Iraqi civil society to support this requirement. The Mission's work includes tracking civilian deaths and injuries to tally casualty figures on a monthly basis. Shown here, the head of UNAMI's Human Rights Office, Francesco Motta, sits in a camp for displaced persons, hearing from a man whose children were abducted by ISIL (Da'esh).

Whether women live or die in a crisis often depends on their access to basic sexual and reproductive health services – often taking a back seat to other urgent needs, like food and shelter. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has been working with Iraq's Ministry of Health and civil society organizations to deliver these vital services to vulnerable populations. UNFPA has also been working hard in Mosul to provide immediate relief to women and girls affected by the conflict – including through the distribution of dignity kits, which contain hygiene supplies such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, soap, sanitary pads and underclothes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been on the ground in Iraq since 1960. Through its various programmes, the UN health agency is currently work on revitalizing, strengthening and sustaining the Iraqi health system based on primary health care. For Mosul, in addition to delivering medicines and supplies to treat injuries and chronic conditions, WHO has conducted trauma management training for medical doctors in Erbil, Ninewa and Dohuk, and for paramedical teams engaged in managing civilian casualties from Mosul.

The fighting in Iraq has caused a massive displacement of people seeking safety – with some 3.1 million displaced inside Iraq, while another 220,000 are refugees in other countries. From Mosul, where, in early December 2016, the number of displaced people approached 100,000, UNHCR stepped up the distribution of winter material – providing thermal blankets and quilts to 11,200 people around Mosul.