'Uphold international humanitarian law' UN chief tells parties to Yemen conflict

Civil conflict deepened across the country in 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition intensified military operations against Houthi rebels who control the capital Sana’a.

Coalition airstrikes hit a government building in the densely-populated Tahrir district of the capital on Monday, reportedly killing six people, and rebels fired several missiles in the days that followed towards different targets in Saudi Arabia.

“The Secretary-General reminds all parties to the conflict that they must uphold international humanitarian law, including taking steps to protect civilians,” said a statement issued on behalf of the Secretary-General, by his Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric.

Yemen: Human suffering at risk of further deterioration, warns UN aid chief

Across Yemen, more than 22 million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance or protection, of whom around 8.4 million are severely food insecure and at risk of starvation.

“If conditions do not improve, a further 10 million people will fall into this category by the end of the year,” cautioned Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, in a statement. The threat of a resurgence in deadly cholera, together with watery diarrhoea also looms, which infected over 600,000 people during the last outbreak, he added.

Of particular concern is the situation of Yemen’s children – one in four are out of school, not only deprived of education but also at risk of recruitment by armed groups and exploitation.
"All potential violations of international humanitarian law should be thoroughly investigated and those responsible for violations must be held accountable," added the statement.

Mr. Dujarric emphasized the Secretary-General’s appeal not to escalate the fighting further “as this adversely impacts the chances for peace.”

Since political unrest first began in Yemen in early 2011, the UN has been engaged in helping Yemenis to find a peaceful solution. However, fighting continues and the ensuing humanitarian crisis has only deepened in a country that was already one of the region’s poorest.

“A negotiated political settlement through inclusive intra-Yemen dialogue is the only way to end the conflict and address the ongoing humanitarian crisis,” said the statement.

Yemen: Human suffering at risk .....  

Amidst worsening suffering in the war-torn country, humanitarian agencies are also facing increasing restrictions on their work, said Mr. Lowcock.

“Humanitarian staff are being detained and intimidated and visas are being delayed and denied. Programmes and missions are being interfered with in ways which contradict humanitarian principles,” he added, calling on the Government to act on the assurances it made in the past and lift restrictions.

Mr. Lowcock, who is also the UN Humanitarian Affairs chief, said that imports of aid and commercial food has declined recently.

“Confidence among commercial shipping companies has eroded due to delays, including as a result of inspections undertaken by the Saudi-led Coalition after these vessels have been cleared by UNVIM,” he said.

The UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen — UNVIM for short — was established to facilitate commercial shipping in and out of Yemeni ports, in order to manage clearance requests and coordinate inspection of cargo at the ports of Hudaydah, Saleef and Ras Isa.

Mr. Lowcock said that humanitarian agencies stand ready to increase their delivery of assistance to the people of Yemen, and called on all warring parties to cooperate more, to ease civilian suffering.

“Finally, I urge all parties to engage meaningfully with the UN, without preconditions, to achieve a lasting, negotiated settlement towards sustainable peace,” he said.
Ahmed: a Man Who Beat his Disability

"I am self-reliant now, and my family and friends are all proud of me that I could beat the physical disability"

Ahmed speaking to one of his clients in a small shop he established in Mualla district in Aden with fund from the Government of Japan through UNDP and its partner For All Foundation, within the Yemen Stabilisation Programme.

Ahmed suffers from deformation in all his four limbs. He now has a sustainable income to live a decent life and help him complete his academic studies.

Ahmed ,30 years old, is from Mualla district in Aden. He lives with his father, mother and younger brother in a small house. Ahmed was born with a defect in his four limbs. Since then, an armchair has become Ahmed’s loyal friend he uses to go to different places where he can finish his studies and find support to his family.

"I was born like that. I cannot use my legs because they are deformed so are my hands and arms. Despite all of that, I still can use my hands to catch things." Ahmed said.

Ahmed has always been passionate about engineering since an early age of his childhood. Despite being disabled, Ahmed perseverance with no regards to discouragement of previous failure has helped him overcome many challenges preventing him of becoming an important member of his community. "My friends used to come to me every morning, pushing my wheelchair to school. I was very much ambitious and wanted to become an engineer when I grow up. I used to fix many electrical devices at home and help many friends identifying issues they had with their phones." He said. However, the deformation in Ahmed’s limbs made joining Engineering seems impossible due to remote location of the Faculty which was in the outskirt of the city. "I went for sociology as it was my second favorite major, but engineering was always there in my blood." Ahmed said and went on explaining: "It seemed strange to many students at the Faculty that a person like me would survive finishing four academic years of college. However, being sociable and friendly with everyone, I coped with the situation and owned the respect of my friends who also played a major role in my current success.”. The academic studies of Ahmed did not cut down his passion towards electronics. He started thinking of building his mobile phones maintenance capacity so that he can work in the same field of his interest, provide an income and unburden the financial pressures of his studies on his father.

"My father and mother are retired and their salary is barely enough to pay for basic needs of my family. " Ahmed said and went on "I always wanted to start a small business and generate an income that supports the whole family. Therefore, my ultimate dream was to find a grant that helps me achieving the goal of becoming independent though opening my small store for mobile maintenance."

In August 2017, Ahmed heard about the UNDP’s Yemen Stabilisation Programme in the social media. He applied for a grant to open his own micro-business in mobile maintenance and accessories vending. He was interviewed and accepted to join the Programme.

Ahmed was included in a vocational training on mobile maintenance for 40 days. As well, he was given a business training by For All Foundation Foundation (FAF), UNDP’s implementing partner.

After that, Ahmed was able to develop an execution plan for his micro-business and given 800 USD to start implementing his project.

"The vocational and business training courses widened my knowledge in mobile maintenance and running a small business. In addition, the grant made my dream comes true."

Ahmed said with enthusiasm. "I devoted part of the front side of my family's house as a store and bought the maintenance equipment and accessories. The people come to me to fix their mobile phones, buy accessories or charge their phones with credits. They also come to pay off their landline phone and internet bills through a system I have in my computer, in return for small fees".
Yemen crisis cause of concern for aid givers

As the World Health Organisation delivers 11 oxygen stations to help the Yemeni capital’s battered health facilities, humanitarian organisations are concerned about what lies ahead.

In the wake of the US President, Donald Trump, electing to pull the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal, many aid agencies that operate in Yemen’s conflict theatres are worried about the wide-ranging human costs the scrapping of this deal could have.

Having travelled to Yemen to selflessly donate tonnes of relief supplies to people severely affected by the conflict, Omani Nasr Al Jadhamy has seen first-hand the pathetic condition of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians.

“The children in Yemen do not believe they have a future. Some of them have not been to school for years, and they don’t know when they will get to go next,” he said. “The condition of the people in Yemen is among the worst in the world. The children and their parents search for food all day. If they find some food, then they eat it, but otherwise, they go to sleep with empty bellies.”

“I have been to the cities of Yemen where there is no one living, because they have all run away because of the war,” added Al Jadhamy. “If you see their condition, it is really sad, and when I was there, I felt like crying.”

Al Jadhamy is planning his fifth trip to Yemen this Ramadan with yet another convoy of much-needed relief supplies, but he does not know if the on-ground situation will enable him to go again.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees requires $79.8 million to provide enough aid to those who require it in Yemen, of which only 24 per cent has been received. The funding gap stands at $60.7 million. According to UNHCR data, 190,352 people have fled to neighbouring nations, while a further 280,692 have surprisingly sought refuge in Yemen, fleeing other conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Yemen has widely been recognised as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, with some 3.28 million persons of concern recorded by the UNHCR, while according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 16.4 million people are in need of healthcare, and only 50 per cent of health facilities are functioning.

“The world cannot afford to let Yemen slip into the abyss,” said Ayman Gharibeh, UNHCR representative to Yemen. “You are dealing with strong, resilient people who are not giving up, so why should you give up? But I don’t think that gives credit to the people we are serving. Refugees have survived because they know how to survive – people are saved by their own resilience, that’s how Yemen survives today.
Amid grinding conflict, Yemen’s midwives go to heroic lengths to save lives

“When the war broke out, I left my job in the city and came to Aslam,” Rawthah Ahmed, a midwife with 25 years of experience, told UNFPA. Her services are desperately needed in Aslam, a remote village in Hajjah Governorate. “There are no health facilities or basic services. People are very poor; they cannot afford to travel in search of medical care,” she explained. “I chose this profession to save pregnant women, so I had to come back to help them”.

Yemen has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the Arab region. A woman’s lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is 1 in 60. And the country’s conflict is only exacerbating the situation, disrupting crucial supply lines and eroding health care. Cholera and diphtheria outbreaks have left pregnant women and newborns more vulnerable than ever.

Across the country, there are an estimated 3 million women and girls of childbearing age in need of vital reproductive health services. Food shortages have left an estimated 1.1 million pregnant women malnourished; 75,000 of these women are likely to develop malnutrition-related complications, which could threaten their lives. Poverty also exacerbates malnutrition, and keeps women from seeking regular check-ups.

“Most of the pregnant women in the area suffer severe malnutrition and are not fit enough travel to the clinic,” Ms. Ahmed said. Midwives like Ms. Ahmed are going to heroic lengths to serve women in need.

“I travel long distances by foot, sometimes at night or in the midst of air strikes, to reach them,” she said. “If I don’t take that risk, pregnant women and their unborn children may be in danger. It is my duty to save them”.

Enormous challenges

Today, it is estimated that only one third of Yemen’s reproductive health facilities are functional. And many families lack the resources to seek care at their nearest hospital.

Midwives are helping to fill these gaps. “I operate a small clinic with a delivery room in my house,” Ms. Ahmed said. “I see between 15 and 20 cases in my clinic each month.”

Her clinic is supported by UNFPA. In recent years, UNFPA has helped 120 midwives like Ms. Ahmed set up home-based clinics. UNFPA is also working to help cover the cost of care for impoverished families.

Still, the challenges are enormous. Poor infrastructure limits midwives’ ability to reach patients and obtain family planning supplies, medicines and other life-saving essentials. As a result, their work can be gruelling and heart-breaking.

“Sometimes, the cases are beyond my help,” Ms. Ahmed explained. “I remember one such incident. A family came rushing to me to see a woman in labour. When I reached their house, I realized the woman was suffering from anaemia caused by acute malnutrition. I did not have the medical supplies to treat her, so I referred her and gave money for the family to take her to a hospital in the city. But the woman could not survive the long distance and the rough roads. She died on the way to the hospital”.

Midwives risking their own lives

The intensity of Yemen’s conflict means midwives often risk their own lives in the course of their duties.

Laila, a midwife in Abyan Governorate, recounted a harrowing childbirth she attended in a neighbourhood that was under attack.

“At 10 pm, I was called to attend to a woman in labour. There was heavy bombing in the area, but I was ready to put my own life at risk to save another life,” she said.
Smugglers see thousands of migrants in Yemen as ‘a commodity’, UN agency warns

With an estimated 7,000 migrants entering Yemen each month, most of them seeking to reach Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, the United Nations migration agency on Tuesday called for greater efforts to protect them from smugglers and other criminals.

“I met teenagers in utter distress from what they had experienced already in their young lives,” said Mohammed Abdiker, Director of Operations and Emergencies at the International Organization for Migration (IOM), following a visit to Yemen this past week.

“They are just a commodity to smugglers,” he added, “something to make quick and easy money from and, if they die, the smugglers do not care as there are thousands of other people willing to pay for their services and risk their lives to simply build their parents a house, put their brother through school, or for any opportunity at all”.

The total number of migrants currently in Yemen is unknown, but nearly 100,000 arrived in 2017. Migrants often leave their homes on foot and walk through Djibouti. From there, they take boats across the Gulf of Aden to the Aden, Lahj, Shabwah, and Hadramout Governorates in Yemen and then attempt to head north to the border with Saudi Arabia.

Some take irregular work in Yemen to make money to fund the rest of their journey while others get caught up in the on-going conflict between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels, sustaining injuries - or dying in crossfire.

Some also end up in detention centres.

At various stages of their journey, these migrants face the risk of being exploited by ruthless smugglers and other criminals, including enduring physical and sexual abuse; torture for ransom; arbitrary detention for long periods of time; or grueling forced labour, without wages.

Last August, scores of Ethiopian and Somali teenagers dreaming of a better life were forced into the sea by smugglers off the coast of Yemen and drowned.

Mr. Abdiker believes without prosecuting those criminals, any humanitarian assistance would be just “a Band Aid”.

In 2017, IOM helped some 2,900 migrants and refugees return home from Yemen: 73 per cent of them were Somalis, 25 per cent Ethiopians, and 2 per cent other nationalities.

This year so far, IOM has helped 197 Ethiopians - together with 939 Somali migrants and refugees - return home voluntarily.

“Yemen is experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world; it is obviously not a safe route for migrants, nor is it safe for Yemenis themselves in many areas,” said Mr. Abdiker.

He said that more and more Yemenis who have fled, are returning from Saudi Arabia due to tightening regulations there.
Fighting the world’s largest cholera outbreak: oral cholera vaccination campaign begins in Yemen

The first-ever oral cholera vaccination campaign in Yemen was launched on 6 May and concludes on 15 May, just before the start of Ramadan. The campaign aims to prevent the resurgence of the world’s largest cholera outbreak. The volatile mix of conflict, a deteriorating economic situation, and little or no access to clean drinking-water and sanitation have resulted in more than one million suspected cholera cases since the outbreak began in April 2017.

A race against time

This campaign is part of a broader cholera integrated response plan, implemented by national health authorities, WHO and UNICEF. Outbreak response activities include surveillance and case detection, community engagement and awareness, enhancing laboratory testing capacity, improving water and sanitation, and training and deploying rapid response teams to affected areas.

This epidemic has affected the entire country, and the implementation of this oral cholera vaccination campaign, as part of the entire response to cholera, marks a milestone in the combined efforts of WHO and UNICEF, in partnership with the World Bank and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, through the generous support of our donors. “The ongoing conflict, lack of access to safe drinking-water, weak sewage systems due to lack of fuel for pumps and the collapsing health system is the perfect mix for a new explosion of cholera during Yemen’s rainy season, which is already in its beginning stages,” said Dr Nevio Zagaria, WHO Representative in Yemen.

“Hot” districts prioritized to prevent spread

On 24 April, UNICEF delivered the first batch of 455 000 doses of oral cholera vaccine from the Gavi-funded global stockpile, targeting people over the age of 1 year, including pregnant women. The Global Task Force for Cholera Control approved the request of more than 4.6 million doses of the vaccine from the global stockpile to target cholera hotspots across the country.

“This vaccination campaign comes at such a critical time. Children in Yemen were the worst hit by last year’s outbreak and remain the most vulnerable due to widespread malnutrition and deteriorating sanitation and hygiene,” said Meritxell Relaño, UNICEF Representative in Yemen.

Recent reports revealed that in the first 3 days of the campaign, more than 124 000 doses of oral cholera vaccine were administered. This represents 35% of the estimated target population in the 4 districts where the campaign began. A fifth district, will be included in the coming days, bringing the total target population to 470 905 individuals. The campaign currently involves 11 fixed teams and 328 mobile teams.
The rich variety of life on Earth is essential for the welfare and prosperity of people today and for generations to come. That is why, 25 years ago, the world’s nations agreed on the Convention for Biological Diversity. The Convention has three goals: the global conservation of biodiversity, its sustainable use and the equitable sharing of its benefits. Achieving these objectives is integral to meet our goals for sustainable development.

Protecting and restoring ecosystems and ensuring access to ecosystem services are necessary for the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Reducing deforestation and land degradation and enhancing carbon stocks in forests, drylands, rangelands and croplands are needed for mitigating climate change. And protecting the biodiversity of forests and watersheds supports clean and plentiful water supplies.

These are just some of the benefits of biodiversity. Yet, despite this understanding, biodiversity loss continues around the globe. The answer is to intensify efforts and build on successes.

This year, Parties to the Convention will begin work on a new action plan to ensure that, by 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used for the benefit of all people. The entire world needs to join this effort. On this International Day for Biological Diversity, I urge governments, businesses and people everywhere to act to protect the nature that sustains us. Our collective future depends on it.