UN chief calls for ceasefire as Yemen braces for possible COVID-19 outbreak

Echoing his 23 March appeal to warring parties across the globe for an immediate ceasefire, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called on those fighting in Yemen to end hostilities and ramp up efforts to counter a potential outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“More than five years of conflict have devastated the lives of tens of millions of Yemenis,” the UN chief said in a statement today, adding that an escalation in fighting in the towns of Al Jawf and Ma’rib now threatens to deepen human suffering.

The Secretary-General called on the parties in Yemen to work with his Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths, to achieve a nation-wide de-escalation. He also urged them to make progress on economic and humanitarian measures aimed at alleviating suffering and building confidence, and to resume an inclusive, Yemeni-led political process.

“A political solution is the only way to a comprehensive and sustainable resolution of the conflict in Yemen,” stressed the UN chief.

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Yemen: UN envoy calls for 'immediate and unconditional' freeze on military activities

In a visit to northern Yemen on Saturday, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths repeated his call for an immediate freeze on military activities and for warring parties to work towards a de-escalation in fighting.

Mr. Griffiths was speaking during a one-day visit to Marib, which he described as a “haven” amid the ongoing conflict between government forces, backed by a Saudi-led coalition, and Ansar Allah, also known as Houthis.

Thousands of people have arrived there following recent fierce fighting in neighboring Al Jawf governorate.

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Resurgent violence amid a global pandemic

Yemen has seen a series of fits and starts in efforts to end its bloody civil conflict, which began in 2015 and has created one of the world’s most severe humanitarian crises.

At the close of 2019, Special Envoy Griffiths reported a significant “drop in the tempo of war”, including an 80 per cent reduction in airstrikes in some areas. An agreement was also signed unifying divided Government factions.

However, on 12 March, Mr. Griffiths warned the UN Security Council that a fresh escalation in violence once again threatens the quest for a political resolution.

Pointing to the recent military escalation in Al Jawf, he expressed concern about the impact of the violence on the people of that governorate – where thousands of families have been displaced and require shelter and assistance – and cautioned that critical humanitarian measures must not be politicized.

The spike in violence comes as outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic have appeared in more countries around the globe.

Yemen: UN envoy calls for ‘immediate and unconditional’ ...

“Last week I issued a public call for a freeze on military activities. Today, I am reiterating that call for an immediate and unconditional freeze and the start of a comprehensive and inclusive and accountable de-escalation process”, he told journalists.

While in Marib, Mr. Griffiths met with the Governor and other senior officials, and with local authorities, tribal chiefs, civil society, women, youth, and displaced people.

“Marib has been an island of relative stability and calm amid the insanity of the war”, he said. “The parties need to ensure that Marib will remain a haven and not become the next epicenter of the fighting and of the war.”

The envoy underscored the UN position that the conflict cannot be solved on the battlefield.

He said Yemen is at a critical juncture: “We will either silence the guns and resume the political process, or we will slip back into large-scale conflict and suffering that you have already seen here in Marib.”
Support for land and irrigation helps stave off debts, brightens prospects for Yemeni farmer

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Yemen announced the beginning of a new project to strengthen the resilience of Yemeni communities. With a particular focus on the governorates of Aden and Lahj, the project entitled Enhancing the Community Resilience by Improving Subsistence Livelihoods and Human Security Project is generously funded by the Government of Japan.

The Project aims to strengthen Yemeni community resilience by increasing socio-economic opportunities, improving service delivery and strengthening community-based protection. UNDP, through our implementing partners, will support 520 beneficiaries from Aden and Lahj – the majority of whom will be women and youth who have directly affected by Yemen’s conflict.

The new project will work to improve economic empowerment of youth and women who are at-risk due to ongoing conflict and war in Yemen’s southern governorates. It is expected that the benefits of economic empowerment will be able to help prevent violent extremism.

“This project will be critical in supporting local-level engagement of community leaders, Village Cooperative Councils, farmers and fisheries association and informal and formal actors to identify community priorities and implement locally owned recovery efforts that target local drivers of conflict,” said Surayo Buzurukova, UNDP Yemen’s Team Leader for the Governance and Rule of Law Unit.

The Japanese funding will help UNDP target the most vulnerable individuals in Aden and Lahj and will assist in facilitating a closer engagement between the communities and their local authorities. The project’s main components include: (a) providing emergency employment; (b) developing community-based protection mechanisms with a focus on women and youth; (c) enhancing income-generating opportunities; and, (d) building individual business management skills.

“I would like to thank the Government of Japan for their continued engagement and invaluable support. This contribution will help the Yemen communities better cope with the effects of the ongoing conflict and will enable those whose livelihoods were severely disrupted to recover and secure a sustainable daily living,” added Buzurukova.

This project will contribute to SDGs 1, 5, 8 and 16.

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About the United Nations Development Programme

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is a United Nations agency that advocates for change and connects countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We provide expert advice, training and grants support to developing countries, with increasing emphasis on assistance to the least developed countries.

UNDP in Yemen aims to restore livelihoods, social cohesion, and security, reflecting minimum conditions necessary for resilience while focusing at the community level. Our priorities for Yemen include: (a) supporting a peaceful solution; (b) economic recovery; (c) restoring basic services; (d) preparing Yemen to transition from humanitarian action to development; and (e) empowerment of vulnerable groups.
Solar powered water pumps help Yemeni farmers restore their agricultural livelihoods

“I am a farmer, and agriculture is my life. One of my biggest challenges was access to water. I grow carrots, potatoes, radish, watercress, onion, parsley, and garden mint. These vegetables need a lot of water to thrive; otherwise, they die, leaving my family and me with nothing to survive on,” says Rashed Abdullah, a 37-year-old Yemeni farmer from Ibb Governorate.

Yemen is predominantly a rural country, with close to 70 percent of its population living in rural areas. Irrigated agriculture is the primary source of food, employment and economic activity. Water scarcity poses one of the most significant constraints to increasing food production in a country where more than half the population requires food assistance.

Recognizing that agriculture is the single most important contributor to resuscitate rural livelihoods, it is crucial to support pro-poor sustainable agricultural production systems. Water management, transfer of appropriate production technology, improvement along value chains and creation of on/off-farm employment opportunities and income-generating activities are among the key intervention that need to be scaled up. In response, FAO and the European Union (EU) partnered to roll out a two-year USD 12.8 million project to enhance the resilience of 150 990 conflict-affected Yemenis while boosting their food security.

Rashed is particularly happy this morning. Today he is among the farmers benefiting from a solar powered community water well established by the FAO-EU project six months ago. This well serves a community of 400 people and every second week, the taps leading to Rashed’s garden are turned on to release the precious liquid into his farm. The project has set up 42 similar water pumps in various districts across the country.

Soaring fuel prices drive up the cost of water “In the past, we used to rely on water from the neighboring village. When the war escalated four years ago, fuel prices rose sharply and pushed up the cost of irrigation water significantly. At first, we sold off some of our animals to buy water, but the price just kept getting higher leaving us with less money for food and medicine. Eventually, we could no longer afford forcing the owner to cut off our water supply,” narrates Rashed.

The sustained fuel crisis across the country has affected thousands of farmers who depend on groundwater for irrigating using fuel operated pumps. FAO, in partnership with the European Union, is supporting farmers by providing them with solar-powered pumps, water-saving drip irrigation kits along with training on improved farming practices.

Before the project, Rashed and other community members had gone without water for four years. Like many of his neighbors, Rashed’s farm slowly dried out. To earn a living, he would travel to the main market in the city of Ibb – 50 kilometers away – where he would buy vegetables in bulk. He would sell the vegetables in the local market, making an average daily profit of USD 4, much less than he needed to feed his 16-member household.

Oasis in the desert

One day while tending to his sheep in the field, he noticed the animals gathering around an isolated patch of green grass. He mobilized other community members to dig the area. They were pleasantly surprised to discover what he describes as “an oasis in the desert.”
De-escalate now, to steer Yemen off ‘precarious path’, UN Security Council hears

For Yemen to transition away from conflict, power must be shared among different political and social components, including women and civil society.

**Peace and Security**

Yemen is at a “critical juncture”, the UN Special Envoy for the country told the Security Council on Thursday. Speaking via video-link, Martin Griffiths said that the combatants will either move towards de-escalation or greater violence, which would make “the path to the negotiating table more arduous”.

Houthis rebels have been fighting the internationally-recognized Government and their allies, for control of Yemen since 2014.

Mr. Griffiths updated the Council that “the most alarming military escalation” has taken place in Al Jawf, the governate east of the Houthi-held capital city, Sana’a, and expressed concern that the surge in fighting there may trigger conflicts in other governorates that would “drag Yemen into a new and irresponsible cycle of violence”.

The UN envoy underscored that “thousands of families have been displaced by the recent fighting and are in critical need of shelter and assistance”, and reiterated that indiscriminate attacks on civilians are “unlawful and reprehensible”, urging them to exercise “maximum restraint”.

Recapping visits to Ma’rib and Sana’a, Mr. Griffiths said he’d visited the latest conflict zone, where he met with a wide host of interlocutors in a bid to stop the fighting.

“I wish to be very clear, there is no justification for military escalation in Marib”, he told the Chamber, “Ma’rib must not become the next epicenter of Yemen’s tragic conflict”.

**Reverse current trajectory**

The UN envoy also spoke of continued clashes in Hudaydah, particularly in the city and the southern part of the governorate, in which civilians are bearing the brunt.

Moreover, he observed “with much concern”, violence elsewhere, including clashes in the governorates of Al-Dhale, Shabwa, Taiz and Saada and warned of “a real risk of a protracted military escalation across much of the country”.

“We must do all we can to support the parties in containing and reversing the current trajectory”, he said.

“It is imperative that the parties agree to participate in a public, accountable, nationwide de-escalation mechanism, that quiets the tempo of war, and steers Yemen off this precarious path”.

The UN envoy also condemned the death sentences handed down by a court in Sana’a earlier this month to 35 Yemeni parliamentarians, calling “the fragmentation and politicization of the judiciary and other institutions” a “serious cause for concern”.

**Some willingness**

Despite his alarming report, Mr. Griffiths said he had also received messages of reassurance saying that “the expeditious resumption of a peaceful political process remains within reach”.

The parties have exhibited some willingness to continue engaging in confidence-building measures, including in a large-scale prisoner exchange and in ensuring the medical air bridge flights to allow Yemeni patients to travel abroad for medical assistance.
IDP Response

UNHCR carried out an assessment mission between 11-21 March to Marib governorate to identify needs for persons displaced during recent escalations in in the north. Out of the 26 new IDP sites identified—which currently host approximately 5,300 families—minimal levels of site management and coordination of basic services were observed, including provisions of food and water. Approximately 80 per cent of sites had no household items. A high level of vulnerability was also observed among fleeing families, particularly women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. UNHCR has finalised the first round of assessments and will support distributions of shelter and basic household items. As an initial step, UNHCR is distributing 300 tents and non-food items (NFI) to 945 families. According to partners, there are still considerable gaps in the Shelter/NFI data; UNHCR is coordinating with relevant stakeholders to address these issues.

On 25 March, heavy rains and floods in Aden took a hard toll on affected IDP hosting sites. Jointly with the Executive Unit, UNHCR and the Shelter/NFI and CCCM clusters conducted a rapid assessment on the sites to evaluate the damage, needs and key priorities. The team visited four IDP hosting sites where close to 600 families live. Monitoring showed that approximately 400 families (2,800 persons) have been severely affected—not only were their shelters and mattresses damaged, but many reported losing their stockpiles of food. Two women and an infant suffered injuries and were referred for medical care; serious protection concerns remain for women, children, and the elderly. The UNHCR-led Shelter/NFI and CCCM clusters are coordinating with partners to lead urgent response for sanitation facilities, food rations, shelter repair and replenishment of basic household items.

Refugee Response

During the reporting period, UNHCR successfully advocated along with other UN agencies to include refugees in the national response plan against COVID-19 for areas under the De Facto Authorities (DFA). As nationals, IDPs are automatically included in the plan. Hygiene kits for all registered refugee and asylum-seeking families are currently being procured for distribution. UNHCR’s health unit briefed representatives from various refugee communities on prevention, and extensive awareness-raising sessions are currently being conducted with health partners and refugee community leaders, with more scheduled in the upcoming days. UNHCR also translated the World Health Organization (WHO)’s Arabic information leaflet on awareness-raising and prevention into five languages, to be printed and distributed through protection partners and community centres.

Various preventive measures against COVID-19 were initiated in the areas under Sub-Office Aden. Extra hygiene kits containing soap and sanitizers were distributed to refugees, IDPs and the financially affected host community in Basateen neighbourhood, with extensive awareness-raising on personal hygiene. Rehabilitation of latrines have begun for the clinics inside Kharaz refugee camp, which is the only health facility for some 9,000 refugees.
Economic sanctions should be lifted to prevent hunger crises in countries hit by COVID-19 – UN rights expert

As the world exhibits new bonds of solidarity in response to the coronavirus pandemic, it is a matter of “humanitarian and practical urgency to lift unilateral economic sanctions immediately,” to prevent hunger crises in pandemic-hit countries, a UN human rights expert, said.

The continued imposition of such measures on Syria, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba and Zimbabwe in particular, severely undermines the fundamental right to sufficient and adequate food, Hilal Elver, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, stressed.

History has shown that unilateral economic sanctions generally have dramatic and detrimental impacts on economic, social and cultural rights, she recalled. “As a result, the wellbeing of the civilian populations becomes severely compromised.”

The Special Rapporteur also urged the international community to pay particular attention to the situation of civilians trapped in conflict settings, and notably those already experiencing acute violations of their rights to food, such as in Yemen, South Sudan, Gaza, Syria and in refugee camps worldwide.

“If the international community is serious about the fight against COVID-19 and the eradication of food and nutrition insecurity, States need to refrain at all times from direct and indirect interference with access to food,” she assured.

The Special Rapporteurs 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. Their positions are honorary, and they are not paid for their work.
Secretary-General's Message on

WORLD WATER DAY

The world’s water resources are under unprecedented threat. Today, some 2.2 billion people lack safe drinking water and 4.2 billion people live without access to adequate sanitation. Unless we act with urgency, the impacts of climate change are projected to exacerbate these figures. By 2050, between 3.5 and 4.4 billion people will live with limited access to water, with more than 1 billion of them living in cities.

This year’s World Water Day focuses on water and climate change. With 2020 a make-or-break year for climate action, this focus is timely. Water is the primary medium through which we perceive the effects of climate disruption, from extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, to glacial melting, saltwater intrusion and sea level rise.

Global heating and unsustainable use will create unprecedented competition for water resources, leading to the displacement of millions of people. This will negatively affect health and productivity and act as a threat multiplier for instability and conflict. The solution is clear. We must urgently scale up investments in healthy watersheds and water infrastructure, with dramatic improvements in the efficiency of water use. We must anticipate and respond to climate risks at every level of water management. We need to urgently step up efforts to strengthen resilience and adaptation for people affected by climate disruption. And, above all, we must use this year and COP26 in Glasgow to bend the emissions curve and create a secure foundation for water sustainability.

On World Water Day, everyone has a role to play. I call on all stakeholders to increase climate action and invest in robust adaptation measures for water sustainability. By limiting global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the world will be in a much better position to manage and solve the water crisis that we all face.