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Story

Killings and detentions connected to recent protests in Iran

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following statement:

“The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet is today expressing alarm at the continuing lack of transparency about casualties and the treatment of some 7,000 detainees, as well as continuing arrests reported to be taking place across the country.

At least 7,000 people have reportedly been arrested in 28 of Iran’s 31 provinces since mass protests broke out on 15 November, and the High Commissioner is extremely concerned about the conditions under which they are being held, including their physical treatment, violations of their right to due process, and the possibility that a significant number of them may be charged with offences that carry the death penalty.
So far, we have information suggesting that at least 208 people were killed, including 13 women and 12 children. There are also reports, which we have so far been unable to verify, suggesting more than twice that number were killed.

Security forces responded to the protests with water cannon, tear gas, batons, and in some cases live ammunition against unarmed demonstrators who posed no imminent threat of death or serious injury. According to reports, members of the Basij militia and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG) were involved in shooting protestors.

“In such circumstances, with so many reported deaths, it is essential the authorities act with far greater transparency,” Bachelet said. “They must undertake prompt, independent and impartial investigations into all violations that have taken place, including the killing of protestors and reported deaths and ill-treatment in custody. And those responsible must be held accountable. There appear to be multiple violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has ratified and is obliged to uphold.”

“Verified video footage indicates severe violence was used against protestors, including armed members of security forces shooting from the roof of a justice department building in one city, and from helicopters in another,” Bachelet said. “We have also received footage which appears to show security forces shooting unarmed demonstrators from behind while they were running away, and shooting others directly in the face and vital organs – in other words shooting to kill. These are clear examples of excessive use of force and serious violations of human rights.”

In what appears to be one of the worst incidents, which took place on 18 November, the High Commissioner said her Office had received information partially corroborating reports that Iranian security forces used machine guns against protestors in Jarahi Square in Mahshahr – including against people fleeing the area and people hiding in nearby reed-beds – resulting in at least 23 people killed, and possibly many more.

As well as protestors, it is reported that bystanders in the street and people watching from their homes were also hit with bullets during the Mahshahr incident. “There are conflicting reports about whether or not there were one or more armed people among the protestors,” Bachelet said. “But this does not in any way justify such an indiscriminate, horrifying and deadly reaction by the security forces.”

“The picture now emerging from Iran is extremely disturbing,” Bachelet said. “I urge the authorities to immediately release from detention all protestors who have been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty, and to ensure their right to due process, including access to a lawyer of their choosing during the investigative stage.”

The full text of the High Commissioner’s press release in English and in Farsi.

Asked where the evidence was coming from the protestors, telegrams or encrypted messaging services, Mr. Colville said his Office did not have a presence in Iran but it had established sources of information. The shutdown of the Internet and social media during the early days was gradually loosening up. Still, it was rather difficult to fully verify the information, which explained why different sources claimed different casualty numbers, for example.

“The information we are giving you is the information we’ve triangulated”, Mr. Colville explained. For the past three weeks, the Office was crosschecking the information and the data presented today “was somewhat cautious presentation of what we think has happened and is within the boundaries of what we believe to be verified, and this includes video footage.”

Civilian casualties and continued hostilities in the north of Syria

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following
Despite the fragile ceasefire in northeastern Syria, we are concerned by two worrying developments and their direct impact on civilians. Firstly, we note a spike in what appears to be an indiscriminate use of attacks IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in residential neighborhoods and local markets. These attacks have mainly been carried out in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups and, to a lesser extent in areas under the control of Kurdish armed groups in northern and north-eastern Syria. And in areas within the “de-escalation zone” in Idlib and parts of Aleppo, we have seen another upsurge of military operations after a relative lull in hostilities in October.

We are gravely concerned by the increased use of IEDs in populated areas. Such use may amount to an indiscriminate attack, a serious violation of international humanitarian law and constitutes a war crime. Since the ceasefire agreement of 22 October, we have recorded a rise in the number of attacks with IEDs, including with vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), in populated areas including residential neighbourhoods and inside at least 12 busy markets and commercial areas in Al-Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo.

Incidents we have verified indicate there were at least 49 attacks with various types of IEDs between 22 October and 3 December of which 43 were recorded in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups. As a result of these attacks, we have recorded at least 78 civilian deaths (including 53 men, seven women and 18 children) and 307 injuries. Seventy-two of the deaths and 258 of the injuries occurred in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups.

Last week, on 26 November, at least 12 civilians including eight men, two women and two boys were killed as a result of what was alleged to be a VBIED that detonated in a residential area in the town of Tel Halaf in rural Ras al-Ain area in al-Hassakeh. On the same day, six civilians including four men and two boys, were killed when a VBIED detonated near a fuel station in the al-Sina’a neighborhood in the city of Tel Abyad in northern Ar-Raqqa.

We are also concerned by the continued military operations in the ‘de-escalation zone’ of Idlib. Airstrikes and ground-based strikes by Government forces and their allies have continued to hit areas under the control of non-State armed actors in Idlib and Aleppo and result in civilian casualties. Non-State armed groups, on their part, have recently escalated attacks on Government controlled areas including in southern Idlib, northern Hama, and Aleppo city. On 21 November, seven civilians were killed and at least 29 civilians injured as a result of what were alleged to be ground-based strikes by non-State armed groups that hit several neighbourhoods in the city of Aleppo.

Despite the ceasefire, intermittent fighting continues to be reported in northeast Syria. On 2 December alone, 10 civilians, including eight boys, were killed and 12 civilians, including two women and seven boys, injured as a result of what were alleged to be ground-based strikes by Turkish affiliated armed groups that hit near a school in a residential neighborhood in the city of Tel Rif’at in northern rural Aleppo. All casualties were internally displaced civilians from Afrin district in northwestern Aleppo and the children killed and injured were 3 – 15 years old.

In the deadliest incidents in Idlib, 10 civilians were killed when a market in the city of Maarat An Numan was hit by an alleged air-strike on 2 December. On the same day, several strikes also hit the Idlib Central Prison, killing at least five people, including a civilian woman and her two children who were visiting an imprisoned family member. The same prison was repeatedly hit before, including on 13 March.

All parties to the conflict must immediately cease and refrain from directing attacks against civilians and civilian objects and from any indiscriminate attacks, and investigate all such incidents. States that support parties to the conflict, even when they are not directly engaged in hostilities, are obliged to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, in all circumstances. We urge States to take all feasible
measures to stop any violations by their allies. We remind all parties to the conflict of their responsibility to protect civilians and to comply with their obligations under international law.”

**The repeal of the medical evacuations law to increase the suffering of asylum seekers and migrants in Australia’s offshore detention facilities**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following statement:

“We are very disappointed by the repeal of the Medevac laws in Australia, which had allowed sick refugees and other migrants held in offshore detention centres to be sent to Australia for treatment. During her recent visit to Australia, the High Commissioner appealed to Members of Parliament not to reverse this law, which had been a humane improvement to some aspects of Australia’s harsh offshore processing and detention policies.

We are concerned by this U-turn in policy and law, and that individuals held in offshore detention may now effectively be deprived of appropriate and prompt medical care and their lives put at risk.

Medical experts, not politicians, should be at the heart of decisions about people’s medical care. Removing a fair, transparent and doctor-led process for accessing essential, and in many cases, life-saving medical care is cruel, inhumane and unnecessary.

We know that past failures to provide proper medical care have led to tragic consequences. Twelve people died in offshore detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea before the Medevac laws were passed. Most of those deaths were the result of physical or mental health conditions brought about by their experience in such detention.

Since coming into force in March of this year, the Medevac laws have ensured that more than 100 people who were extremely unwell, received access to vital medical care in Australia.

The repeal of the Medevac laws means that sick people in offshore detention will now have no option but to return to the previous process of taking legal action in order to access medical care. This is lengthy, costly and an unnecessary burden on the Australian court system, and will mean further suffering for these people.

Under international human rights law, all individuals, regardless of their status, have the right to health. They are also protected against unsafe return, and given that most of these individuals are unable or unwilling to go back to their countries, there is an urgent need to find rights-based and dignified solutions to their situation.”

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), shared the disappointment of Wednesday’s repeal of the Medevac legislation by the Australian Parliament.

More than 3,000 refugees and asylum seekers had been forcibly transferred by Australia to the so-called offshore processing facilities at Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and Nauru since the introduction of the policy in 2013, he said. Nearly 600 were still there.

Australia was and remained responsible under international law for those who had sought its protection. Transferring refugees and asylum seekers to a territory of another State did not transfer Australia’s responsibility for their care, protection and the search for solutions, Mr. Baloch stressed.

UNHCR urged the Government of Australia to find appropriate solutions, including taking up the longstanding offer by New Zealand to resettle refugees and to prevent further harm. Over 80 per cent of the refugees and asylum seekers in the so-called offshore processing facilities suffered from depression, anxiety
and post-traumatic stress disorder – the highest rate anywhere in the world.

The Australian Government had justified the decision on the grounds that those individuals constituted a threat to national security, a journalist noted. Mr. Colville said his Office did not share this assessment and recalled that under the now repealed Medevac law the Government had the power to refuse the transfer on the national security grounds. Clearly, a great majority of the concerned individuals were not a national security threat.

Mr. Baloch added that the Medevac provisions established a necessary humanitarian response to the medical needs of refugees and asylum seekers in this context, as well as critical transparency and predictability for thousands of people. Under the law, the Government’s expert medial panel visited the centres, monitored and assessed the quality and standard of care, and provided the necessary oversight.

Asked why the Australian Government had not taken up the offer from New Zealand, Mr. Baloch said that several countries, including the United States, had offered to assist with the repatriation of people stuck in limbo in the horrific conditions in the offshore processing facilities. The United Nations Refugee Agency continued to highlight the tremendous humane costs of this situation and continued to urge Australia to take up the offer and help the refugees’ resettlement to New Zealand and other countries.

Brazil’s decision to recognize thousands of Venezuelans as refugees a milestone in refugee protection in the region - UNHCR

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), read the following statement:

“UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, welcomes Brazil’s move to recognize thousands of Venezuelan asylum-seekers as refugees on a prima facie basis. Some 21,000 Venezuelans in the country immediately benefited from the decision on Thursday by Brazil’s National Committee for Refugees (CONARE).

From now on, asylum claims from Venezuelans who fulfill the necessary criteria in Brazil will be processed through an accelerated procedure, without the need for an interview. This move constitutes a milestone in refugee protection in the region and follows a decision in June this year by CONARE to recognize that the situation in Venezuela amounted to serious and generalized human rights violations as described under the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.

To benefit from the new provision, Venezuelan asylum seekers must be living in Brazil, not hold any other residence permit in the country, be over 18, possess a Venezuelan identity document, and have no criminal record in Brazil.

The Brazilian authorities estimate that some 224,000 Venezuelans are currently living in the country. An average of 500 Venezuelans continue to cross into Brazil every day, mostly into the northern and isolated state of Roraima.

The Brazilian government continues to lead the humanitarian response for the most vulnerable Venezuelans arriving in the country, while also promoting innovative, open and generous ways to support their socio-economic inclusion.

To date, over 750,000 asylum claims have been filed by Venezuelans worldwide, the majority in Latin American countries and the Caribbean. Brazil has registered over 120,000 asylum seekers, according to the latest official figures. The decision announced on Thursday in Brasilia will have a positive impact on the protection of Venezuelans in the country and will also help ease the pressure on Brazil’s national asylum system.

UNHCR reiterates its readiness to continue providing technical and operational support to enhance national
capacities to process asylum claims. We are committed to working to secure greater international support for the Brazilian response and we hope that Brazil will continue to use its regional leadership in the protection of those forcibly displaced, especially in the context of the current Venezuelan crisis.

Following the deterioration of the situation inside Venezuela, UNHCR earlier this year encouraged Governments to recognize the refugee status of Venezuelans through group-based determinations, such as the prima facie approach now adopted by Brazil. UNHCR continues to make this call to other countries in the region, as the magnitude of the current outflows poses complex challenges and may lead to asylum systems being overwhelmed.”

**More support needed for refugee education in Iran**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), read the following statement:

“UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, welcomes Iran’s efforts to extend education opportunities for nearly half a million Afghan children in the country, and recognizes that the country needs greater humanitarian support because of the economic challenges it faces today.

Iran has been one of the world’s leading refugee hosts for decades and currently has some one million registered refugees from Afghanistan. In addition, over two million Afghans are estimated to live in Iran either without documentation or on national passports.

Iran leads by example in including refugees in national services. Since a law introduced in 2015, all Afghan children can go to school, regardless of whether they are refugees, holders of an Afghan national passport or undocumented. Refugee children study side by side with their Iranian classmates, following the national curriculum.

Official figures estimate that some 480,000 Afghan refugee and undocumented children are currently enrolled in school for the 2019-2020 academic year, a steady increase from the previous years. In 2019 alone, Iran has created places for some 60,000 new Afghan students in its schools.

Particularly in light of ongoing economic challenges, the country needs additional humanitarian support to ensure education and other services to refugees are maintained.

In the past year the cost of living in Iran has skyrocketed, making it harder than ever before for families - Iranians and Afghans alike – to make ends meet.

UNHCR remains concerned that without additional global support for refugee operations in Iran, our ability to continue supporting the government in providing education to Afghan children will be drastically affected.

In 2019, UNHCR co-funded with the government the construction of a dozen school buildings for refugees and Iranians (each with 12 class rooms) at a cost of US$650,000 each. With increasing construction costs and without enough funding the same may not be possible in 2020.

In 2016, the Government of Iran removed the school fee that refugee families had to pay to secure a place in school for their children, putting refugee families on a par with Iranians. However, an increase in the cost of school supplies and uniforms has put further pressure on families’ budgets, and a recent threefold increase in the price of petrol is expected to raise the cost of transportation to school for families that need it.

Currently, some schools operate on two shifts to give the opportunity to as many children as possible to get an education. But many schools are still overcrowded, with teachers often struggling to allocate enough time to each student.
A worrying number of refugee and undocumented families have told UNHCR that, due to increased daily costs, they may have to take their children out of school and send them out to work so they can contribute to the family income.

So far for our Iran operations, UNHCR has received only 30 per cent of the required US$98.9 million to date.”

Death toll mounts from tragic sinking of a vessel off the coast of Mauritania on Wednesday

Paul Dillon, for International Organization for Migration (IOM), read the following statement:

“The death toll from Wednesday’s tragic sinking of a fishing boat carrying migrants to the Canary Islands rose to 62 late yesterday with the recovery of four bodies as IOM’s efforts to help survivors gathered momentum. The captain of the vessel is thought to be among the dead, and based on eyewitness testimonies, there are concerns the toll will continue to mount.

IOM is now focusing on helping migrants recover from shock, receiving appropriate medical treatment and that specific health vulnerabilities are identified.

An IOM doctor is now working alongside Mauritanian authorities in Nouadhibou, the second largest city in northern Mauritania to assess cases, and two of the Organization’s psychologists will arrive today to offer psychosocial assistance to the 85 men, women and at least ten minors who managed to swim to shore after the vessel sank in rough seas.

At least 150 people were thought to be aboard the vessel, which began its journey last Wednesday (27/11) in The Gambia. The Organization is now working with the ICRC in Mauritania to link families who believe their loved ones were aboard the boat, with consular officials who began conducting interviews with the survivors on Thursday. Seventy-nine of the survivors are from The Gambia and six are Senegalese.

“We have been receiving calls from families in The Gambia who believe their loved-ones were on the boat,” said IOM Mauritania Chief of Mission Laura Lungarotti. “This is one of our priorities at this time.”

IOM’s Missing Migrant’s Project reports 158 people have died in 11 confirmed fatal sinking this year along the 1,400 km-long Western Africa migration route which runs from Cabo Verde to the Canary Islands. Eight of the earlier fatal trips began in Morocco and two in Mauritania. At least 43 people died in five reported shipwrecks in 2018.

The Project reports that collecting reliable data along this largely unpatrolled route is challenging and vessels may be disappearing without a trace. Later operations could move into more sustainable solutions in cooperation with the Mauritanian and consular authorities, such as potential family reunification and return to countries of origin of survivors.”

World Food Programme scaling up emergency food programme in Haiti

Bettina Luescher, for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), said WFP had begun scaling emergency food assistance to 700,000 most vulnerable people in Haiti. It has appealed for US$62 million to fund the operation and reach the people. The agency had started humanitarian air service to reach areas difficult or impossible to access by road. A chartered Mi8-AMT helicopter is providing reliable transport for cargo and staff from the 24 humanitarian organizations.

The families in Haiti were going through very hard times and the situation was dramatic, said Ms. Luescher. Rising prices, a weakening local currency and a drop in agricultural production have combined to push one in three Haitians, or 3.7 million people, into food insecurity. Of those, 1 million were suffering from severe
hunger.

Humanitarian access and food transport were restricted by civil unrest, roadblocks and insecurity flashpoints, particularly on the main roads between the capital Port-au-Prince and Artibonite and across southern Haiti.

WFP had met the emergency food needs of 138,000 people across the country. New distributions and deliveries would be organized whenever the security situation allows. Food had been delivered to 70 per cent of the 1,200 schools participating in the school feeding programmes since September 2019. For many poor children, this school meal was the only hot meal they would get, but this largest food safety net in Haiti was particularly affected by the civil unrest: only 60 per cent of schools had reopened since the turmoil began three months ago.

Over the past three weeks, nearly 23,000 people had received emergency food assistance in the Nord-Ouest department, the most food insecure in the country. The families had received enough food for a month. This food came from the pre-positioned reserves to allow the emergency response to hurricanes.

Now that the hurricane season was over, the food was distributed to the population. WFP was also expanding distributions and providing cash and vouchers to other departments affected by food insecurity. In November, 67,000 people had received cash so as local markets recovered, households could purchase food locally.

**Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution turns 40**

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), said the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution would be held on 11 and December in Room XXI at the Palais des Nations.

The Convention was a remarkable example of international cooperation that had produced tangible results to tackle the significant global problem. Although it was a regional treaty, there was an increased interest in participation and cooperation from countries outside of the UNECE region. Next week, a forum for international cooperation on air pollution would be established, marking a new chapter in the Convention’s history, Mr. Rodriguez said.

Air pollution was a major global problem. This largest single environmental health risk, and a leading cause of death by cancer, was responsible for more than seven million deaths every year. It threatened almost two-thirds of Europe’s ecosystems and contributed to the climate emergency.

The economic costs of air pollution-related premature deaths were staggering. In the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, the average cost amounted to 3.5 per cent of the gross domestic product per year. It cost Brazil 3.1 per cent of its annual gross domestic product, China 7.9 per cent and India 10.6 per cent. Tackling air pollution more decisively would have a tangible impact on public finances in many countries.

The Convention – which had 51 Member States, almost every State from the region – had significantly reduced the emissions of harmful substances, adding one year to the life expectancy of Europeans and cutting the number of premature deaths by 600,000 per year.

The decoupling of the economic growth and air pollution had also been improved: a recent report had found that if the emissions had increased in line with the growth of the gross domestic product, health impacts of air pollution in Europe would be three times that of today and hundreds of thousands more people would die prematurely every year, Mr. Rodriguez stressed.

**Syria peace process**
A journalist asked whether Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria would participate in the 10 and 11 December meeting between Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Astana Process guarantors. Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, said she believed the Special Envoy would travel to Astana and that the journalists would be informed as soon as it was confirmed.

**Announcements**

**Human Rights Council**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said the Human Rights Council would hold an organisational meeting at 3 p.m. today, 6 December, to elect its bureau for 2020. It would also discuss a draft President’s statement regarding its long-term efficiency process.

The meeting, which would take place in Room XX, will be webcast and is open to the media. A press release will be issued at the end of the day, indicating the bureau appointees and summarizing the meeting.

**World Trade Organization**

Fernando Puchol, for the World Trade Organization (WTO), announced the following events:

- The **Trade Negotiating Committee and Heads of Delegation** was meeting today, 6 December, in preparation of the General Council. A press briefing will be held at 5 p.m.

- The **General Council** will meet from 9 to 11 December to discuss 24 agenda items. A press briefing is scheduled on 10 December at 5 p.m.

- On Wednesday, 11 December, **Director-General** Roberto Azevêdo will hold a press conference, tentatively scheduled at 1 p.m. On Thursday, 12 December, he will present his **annual overview of trade developments** at the meeting of the Trade Policy Review Body, highlighting trade measures implemented by WTO members between mid-May and mid-October 2019.

Asked about the WTO annual budget proposal approved at the Committee on Budget, Finance and Administration and the possibility that it would be rejected at the General Council, Mr. Puchol said WTO members agreed on a favorable recommendation for the 2020 budget. That recommendation would be forwarded for endorsement to the General Council next week and would not be in effect until approved by the General Council.

**United Nations**

7 December was **International Civil Aviation Day**.

9 December was **International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime.** It was also **International Anti-Corruption Day**.

10 December was **Human Rights Day**. This year, it celebrated the role of young people in bringing human rights to life. In his message, the United Nations Secretary-General said that globally, young people were marching, organizing and speaking out, for the right to a healthy environment, for the equal rights of women and girls, to participate in decision-making, and to express their opinions freely. The Secretary-General called on everyone to support and protect young people who were standing up for human rights.

The **Committee Against Torture** was closing its sixty-eighth session this morning, during which it
reviewed the reports of Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Cyprus, Latvia and Niger.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is meeting in private until the end of its one-hundredth session on 13 December, when it will issue concluding observations on the report of Colombia, Cambodia, Ireland, Uzbekistan and Israel.