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Story

*World Economic Situation and Prospects 2019 report*

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that the *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2019* report was a joint product of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the five United Nations regional commissions. It would be presented at a press conference planned for 14 January 2020.

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

“We are concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in Libya, including the impact of the ongoing conflict on civilians, attacks against human rights defenders and journalists, treatment of migrants and refugees, conditions of detention and impunity. In 2019, our Office along with the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has so far documented at least 284 civilian deaths and 363 injuries as a result of the armed conflict in Libya – an increase of more than a quarter over the number of casualties recorded during the same period last year.

Airstrikes were the leading cause of civilian casualties, accounting for 182 deaths and 212 injuries, followed by ground fighting, improvised explosive devices, abductions and killings. During the same period, the World Health Organization has documented 61 conflict-related attacks against health care facilities and personnel, which is a 69 percent increase compared to the same period in 2018. We have grave concerns about the impact the conflict is having on densely populated areas such as Abu Salim and Al Hadba, where an additional 100,000 civilians are at risk of being displaced, on top of the 343,000 who already have been.

Journalists, media workers and human rights defenders continue to be subjected to violence, threats and harassment. In the most recent such case, Reda Fhelboom, a well-known human rights defender and journalist, was detained on 14 December by an armed group at Mitiga airport in Tripoli, following his arrival from Tunis. We are concerned that his subsequent disappearance may be linked to his human rights or journalistic work. His disappearance is a violation of Libya’s obligations to ensure his human rights. We have also observed an increase in cases of hate speech and incitement to violence fuelling a climate of mistrust, fear and violence among different groups in Libya.

As you know, the treatment of migrants and refugees in Libya has been a matter of huge concern over the past few years, and they continue to be routinely subjected to violations and abuses, including extrajudicial and arbitrary killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, abduction for ransom, extortion, and forced labour, by State officials, traffickers and smugglers. Between January and November, more than 8,600 migrants were intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard and returned to Libya, which of course cannot be considered by any stretch of the imagination as a safe port for disembarkation. Many of those intercepted were returned to official and unofficial detention centres where they are routinely subjected to serious human rights violations and abuses. We are also concerned that parties to the conflict in Libya continue to store weapons and ammunition in close proximity to civilian locations, particularly detention centres where migrants and refugees are being detained. We remind the parties of their obligation to take all feasible precautions against the effects of attacks.

To date in 2019, an estimated 8,813 individuals have been held in 28 official prisons under the authority of the Ministry of Justice, of whom an estimated 60 percent were in pre-trial detention. We have continued to receive credible reports of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, and overcrowding in detention facilities under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. Conditions in unofficial places of detention, often run by armed groups, are even more difficult to monitor and are likely to be even worse.

Finally, we are concerned about the continuing climate of impunity in Libya, including the 15 December acquittal by the Tripoli Appeals Court of all the defendants, including former intelligence chief Abdullah Senussi, in the trial relating to the 1996 massacre of 1,200 people in the Abu Salim prison in Tripoli. The Abu Salim massacre was one of the grievances that gave rise to the 2011 uprising in Libya. We reiterate the call made in September for the creation of an investigative mechanism into serious crimes committed in Libya.”

Responding to questions from the press, Mr. Colville said that the situation was extremely complex, with dozens of groups involved in the fighting and a great number of human rights violations. It was therefore not
possible to provide a breakdown of those responsible for specific incidents. Although OHCHR and UNSMIL continued to be actively engaged in the region, cuts in funding had led to fewer staff, which in turn made monitoring activities more difficult. Moreover, access had worsened; for instance, it had not been possible in the vast majority of official detention facilities to conduct interviews with detainees in private. The fact that myriad groups were operating in the country under almost no central control further complicated matters.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, recalled that the Secretary General had recently expressed his frustration at the fact that so many countries were violating the arms embargo and also that so many different groups were fighting in Libya.

Iraq

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

“We are concerned by the continued pattern of deadly attacks in Iraq against human rights defenders, civil society activists and protesters. These are targeted attacks for the most part. During the past 10 days alone, we have received credible reports of at least six separate incidents in Baghdad, Missan, Karbala and Diwaniya, resulting in three deaths and six people injured.

- On 8 December and again, seven days later, on 15 December, improvised explosive devices attached to vehicles detonated in Diwaniya and Karbala, injuring three civil society activists, who had participated in demonstrations and appear to have been directly targeted.
- On 8 December, in Amara city in Missan governorate, a human rights activist survived an attempt to kill him while on his way to visit a friend, but was seriously injured in the attack.
- Also on 8 December, in Karbala, a civil society activist was shot dead while riding his motorbike. Two other people on the motorbike were unharmed, fortunately.
- On 10 December, another human rights activist was shot and killed in Baghdad when leaving a protest site.
- On 14 December, three civil society activists were gunned down from a pickup truck in Baghdad. One of them was killed, and the other two wounded. All three had been volunteers providing bread to protesters during the demonstrations.

We are following-up other allegations of targeted killings. Currently, we have insufficient information to determine who the perpetrators of these latest attacks are, but witnesses and local people we have spoken to say they believe groups whom they describe as ‘militias’ are responsible. We are not aware of any progress made by the Iraqi authorities in tracking those responsible for these attacks and arresting them.

The killings of civil society activists are occurring against a backdrop of disappearances of high-profile protesters in Baghdad. Many of those arrested by Iraqi security forces are being held in what may amount to incommunicado detention. Others are believed to have been abducted by groups referred to as ‘militias’, and they are at serious risk of ill-treatment. Both security forces and these so-called ‘militias’ are clearly targeting well-known demonstrators and activists. We are closely monitoring all cases that come to our attention.

A report issued last week by the Human Rights Office of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) called for prompt and independent investigations into all demonstration-related deaths since 1 October. The report also called for immediate steps to prevent deliberate killings of human rights defenders and immediate action to release abductees from any form of unlawful detention.”

Responding to questions from the press, Mr. Colville said that if any investigations had been initiated concerning the aforementioned incidents, OHCHR was not aware of them; the same was true for many earlier cases of violence. Since the beginning of the demonstrations on 1 October, violence related to the
demonstrations had led to at least 423 deaths and at least 8,758 injuries. The follow-up of cases was at different stages; and because proper procedures for detaining people were not being observed, it was not always clear who was being detained and where.

Poland

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

“We are concerned by draft legislation, submitted to the Polish parliament on 12 December, which risks further jeopardizing the independence of the judiciary in Poland and would place constraints on judges in exercising their freedom of association and freedom of expression. It could even result in judges being dismissed if they question the Government’s judicial reform.

The draft act which amends the existing law on the structure of common courts, the law on the Supreme Court and a number of other acts, may also prevent judges from fulfilling their legal obligation, under EU treaties, to apply EU law. In general, it risks further undermining the already heavily challenged independence of the judiciary in Poland.

We understand some amendments, proposed by the ruling party, were apparently provided to the draft law overnight. However, I am unable to say at this point whether these mitigate some of the concerns over the draft law, as the new version with amendments was not available online as of early this morning. The second reading of the draft at the Parliament was scheduled to take place this morning, right now.

We urge the Polish Government and the members of the Parliament (Sejm) to consider carefully the potential impact of the draft legislation on the rule of law in Poland. As a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Poland is required to ensure the independence of the judiciary, and as an incoming member of the UN Human Rights Council, Poland is also expected to set a high standard of compliance with international human rights law. Any measures which are contrary to the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary should immediately be lifted.”

Responding to questions from the press, Mr. Colville said that it was difficult to give details about the impact of certain amendments, as their content was not yet known. The initial drafts of articles 9 (d) and 88 (a) appeared to severely restrict judges’ freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, respectively; it was feared that such restrictions might impact on judges’ willingness to become involved in discussions of important, legitimate topics.

In response to a further question, Mr. Colville said that there were concerns that the draft legislation might undermine judges’ ability to fulfil their obligations not only under European Union law, but also under international human rights law. The Human Rights Committee, in its general comment No. 32, on article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, placed heavy emphasis on the independence of the judiciary; there was a fear that the draft legislation would undermine that independence, rather than secure it. The Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary likewise set out a number of important provisions on how to guarantee the independence of the judiciary. Further, the special procedures had taken an interest in the independence of judges in Poland back in 2017, when the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers had undertaken a visit to the country; in his report on the visit, he had expressed concern about some of the reforms to the Polish justice system being proposed at the time.

Yemen
Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that a new member had been appointed to the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, to replace one of the three previous members, who had had to step down for health reasons. The mandate of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts had been renewed for one further year by the Human Rights Council on 26 September 2019. The Group’s reports and details about their work were available on their website.

**Update from the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria**

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria would brief the Security Council at 10 a.m. in New York on 20 December 2019; it would be webcast.

**Lesotho**

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), made the following statement:

“The UN team and humanitarian partners is today launching a US$34 million Flash Appeal, this one in Lesotho, to urgently support over 260,000 people with life-saving interventions up till April 2020. A total half a million people - more than a quarter of the population in Lesotho, a small and landlocked country in southern Africa - are facing severe food insecurity because of a severe drought which has gripped the country at the same time as people are approaching the peak of the lean season.

The planting season earlier in the year was almost ruined by the late onset of rains and extremely hot temperatures which led to very poor harvests. Overall cereal production decreased by more than 60 percent compared to 2018.

The Government of Lesotho on 30 October declared a national disaster and issued a Drought Response and Resilience Plan. Our Flash Appeal will support the Government's response.

Most of the food insecure people are in rural areas and we estimate that at the peak of the lean season, which runs from January to March, some 71,000 people will face emergency conditions in rural districts, that is IPC Phase 4, one step away from famine. Most of the rural population in Lesotho rely almost entirely on agriculture for their income, leaving them highly vulnerable when droughts strike. This is particularly the case for women farmers, who own fewer assets than their male colleagues.

The relief plan in the Flash Appeal includes food and cash assistance; ensuring clean water in priority locations such as health facilities and schools; vaccinations to prevent disease outbreaks or spread of diseases; rehabilitation of water points and preparing for the next planting season; and nutritional interventions for malnourished children, pregnant women, and people living with HIV. Lesotho has the second highest HIV prevalence rate in the world at 25.6 per cent. One in four people are living with HIV and they face particular challenges and need special care.”

In response to a question about displacement, Mr. Laerke said that about three quarters of those targeted by the relief plan lived in rural areas. When food ran out and hope was lost, people tended to move, inside the country and across borders. One particular concern related to such movements was that they made women and girls more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Such abuse was of course in itself deplorable, but even worse when one considered the HIV rate in the country. Therefore, protection programmes had been included in the relief plan to address that concern.