

RtoP WEEKLY

INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

Informal UNGA meeting calls for emergency session on Syria, urges international community to uphold responsibility to protect civilians



The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), at the request of over 70 Member States, [gathered](#) for an informal meeting on 20 October to discuss the ongoing conflict and deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [opened](#) his remarks at the meeting by noting his grave concern over the UN Security Council's failure to take timely action to promote peace and security in Syria, allowing regional rivalries to take priority over the needs of the Syrian people. The Secretary-General also noted that several parties involved in the conflict have committed violations of human rights and international law that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

During the meeting, at least six Member States, including Canada, Botswana, and Switzerland, directly [echoed](#) the Secretary-General's appeal for Syria and the international

community to uphold their responsibility to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, and several Member States [noted](#) that while the recent [humanitarian pause](#) in Russian and Syrian military action in Aleppo is a step in the right direction, it falls short of the actions necessary to allow for both the creation of evacuation corridors and unimpeded access to deliver humanitarian and medical aid to civilians.

Many Member States argued that only a political solution can end the nearly six-year-long conflict and an emergency session of the UNGA should be called in order to implement a peaceful cessation of hostilities and initiate a political transition in Syria. The General Assembly has only [convened](#) 10 emergency sessions in the history of the United Nations, the last of which took place in 2009 regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The conflict has [killed](#) nearly 500 civilians, more than a quarter of which were children, and injured an additional 2,000, since the Syrian government, in conjunction with Russia and Iran, began renewed efforts to retake territory from opposition forces last month. On Wednesday alone, a purported Russian or Syrian airstrike [killed](#) at least 14 children and seven teachers and injured at least 75 others when it struck a school complex near the city of Idlib. Despite international efforts, including calls for a renewed cessation of hostilities in Aleppo and the issuance of facilitation papers to allow access to UN aid trucks, Russia has [announced](#) it is not planning any more humanitarian pauses in the country.

Source for above photo of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the informal meeting of the seventy-first session of the General Assembly on the situation in Syria. UN Photo/Amanda Voisard

Catch up on developments in...

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Burma/Myanmar:

On 22 October, Burmese armed forces [demanded](#) that the United Wa State Army (UWSA) withdraw its forces from any areas under the administration of the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) in and around the town of Mongla in eastern Shan State. Residents have already begun to [flee](#) the area in light of the Army's 24 October ultimatum date having passed.

On 24 October, the repatriation of refugees from Thailand to Burma began with the voluntary return of 68 people from camps [along](#) the Thai-Burma border. For the past 30 years, Thailand has hosted over 100,000 refugees from Burma who fled their homes to escape the civil war in the country, with many of the refugees belonging to the Karen, Mon and Shan minority ethnic groups. The UNHCR has hailed the start of repatriation as a milestone in one of the world's most protracted displacement situations.

The following day, the UN called for an investigation as allegations continue to be brought forward that state security forces, operating in Rakhine State, are continuing in a campaign of violence and repression [against](#) the stateless Rohingya minority. Up to 15,000 people have been displaced by the actions of security forces in the wake of the 9 October attack on border outposts in the region. Burmese officials have stated that they have killed 30 "attackers", while rights groups claim that the majority of the dead have been civilians, who are also subjected to the burning of villages and arbitrary arrests. Human Rights Watch has called upon the Burmese government to allow aid to reach the region and those displaced, [claiming](#) that the government is currently blocking all aid to the area.

Burundi:

On Wednesday, Burundi officially [informed](#) UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of the country's decision to withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Some African politicians [welcomed](#) the Burundian withdrawal from the ICC, including the president of Sudan who encouraged other African countries to do the same. Just days later, South Africa [announced](#) its decision to follow the example set by Burundi. The ICC has [asked](#) Burundi and South Africa to reconsider their withdrawals from the institution and has urged them to work together with the Court to end impunity and protect human rights. Meanwhile, on Tuesday, Botswana [released](#) a statement reaffirming its support for the ICC and expressing "regret" over South Africa's decision to withdraw. However, Gambia also [announced](#) its intended withdrawal from the Court on Wednesday.

On Monday, it was [discovered](#) that the Interior Ministry of Burundi issued an order to withdraw permits and ban activities of several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country after accusing the organizations of taking sides and working to evoke hostility towards the government. The general secretary of FOCODE, one of the recently banned NGOs, [said](#) that the ban is a "threat to civil freedom and a threat to freedom of association".

Several NGOs, including ICRtoP member Human Rights Watch, [published](#) an open letter on Wednesday to the Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Member States of the United Nations in Geneva and New York regarding the situation in Burundi. The letter encourages a suspension of Burundi from the UN Human Rights Council if it fails to cooperate with the UN Commission of Inquiry in the country, as allegations of severe violations of human rights need to be investigated and the government has refused to cooperate with the UN system.

Central African Republic:

On Monday, hundreds of people [gathered](#) to protest against MINUSCA, the UN mission in the country, accusing the mission of not doing enough to protect civilians. The protesters also [claimed](#)

that MINUSCA is supporting the rebels. People threw stones and shouted at the troops who, according to a witness, responded with warning shots. Eventually armed groups and peacekeepers exchanged fire,

[resulting](#)

in at least three dead protesters and several injured, including four

[peacekeepers](#)

. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

[condemned](#)

the violence the following day and welcomed action taken by the government to ensure accountability for the perpetrators.

Cote d'Ivoire:

ICRtoP member Human Rights Watch (HRW) has [called](#) for the government of Côte d'Ivoire to respect the rights of those opposed to the newly drafted constitution, stating that civilians have the right to express dissenting opinions on the document. This follows actions by security forces to disperse protests and gatherings against the constitution, including the detainment of dissenters and opposition leaders; however, some protests occurred without incident.

Democratic Republic of Congo:

The World Food Programme has [released](#) an Emergency Dashboard for October 2016, indicating that there are approximately 1.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 429,613 refugees currently within the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Gaza/West Bank:

The European Commission has [released](#) a Fact Sheet for October 2016, which indicates that there are approximately 1.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and parts of Area C; of those in need, approximately 60,000 people were displaced from the 2014 Gaza Strip conflict.

Iraq:

Islamic State (ISIL) allegedly [executed](#) 284 men and boys on Thursday and Friday of last week in the city of Mosul. The deceased were allegedly from the approximately 550 families that ISIL forcibly moved from villages into Mosul to be used as human shields. The extremist group then used a bulldozer to bury the bodies in a mass grave near Mosul's defunct College of Agriculture.

Nearly 1,000 civilians living near the city of Mosul have [sought](#) medical treatment citing breathing problems linked to toxic gases from a sulphur plant that ISIL allegedly set on fire. No deaths have been reported so far as a result of the incident. The fire is thought to be aimed at deterring advancing Iraqi and US-led coalition forces.

New evidence has [emerged](#) that ISIL killed 50 former police officers on Sunday who were being held captive in a building in Mosul. Bodies of an additional 70 civilians were found in their homes in a village just outside the city, while another 15 civilians were killed and thrown into a river. The perpetration of these latest atrocities is reportedly an attempt to continue the spread of terror as Iraqi and US-led coalition forces begin to converge on the city.

Hundreds of ISIL fighters, deemed "suicide squads", have [arrived](#) in Mosul from their Syrian stronghold in Raqqa to defend the city against the Iraqi army and US-led coalition. The foreign fighters have been seen wearing explosive belts, arming bridges with bombs, and are said to have prepared several vehicles with suicide bombs.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has [provided](#) over 1,000 reproductive health consultations to women fleeing Mosul since the Iraqi and US-led coalition offensive began earlier this month. UNFPA has postured 25 reproductive health teams and 20 maternal health facilities as part of its humanitarian response in Mosul.

More than 1,000 civilians living in the Tob Zawa village near the city of Mosul have been safely [moved](#) by Iraqi special forces to nearby refugee camps this week. At least 9,000 people have been displaced since the operation began on 17 October.

Kenya:

On 24 October, members of the extremist group, al Shabaab, attacked a hotel located in the town of Mandera in northeast Kenya, [killing](#) 12 people.

ICRtoP member Human Rights Watch (HRW) has [called](#) for a probe into police killings in Kenya as about 1,200 deaths have been blamed on security forces in the last five years. The organization also reported that around 34 people have been forcibly disappeared by security forces in counter-terrorism operations in the last two years, noting that, so far, only one police officer has been held accountable.

Libya:

Late last week, Italian Coast Guard forces [reported](#) seeing a speedboat labelled “Libyan Coast Guard” attack a boat overcrowded with refugees off the coast of Libya, using sticks as weapons. At least four refugees fell into the water and drowned and up to 25 people are missing. The European Union has previously initiated a plan to train Libyan forces to manage their own sea rescue operations. Following the report on this incident, a German aid group has [urged](#) the EU to rethink the decision in order to protect refugees.

Mali:

Germany has [agreed](#) to assist the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with military helicopters if no other country decides to help, as the Netherlands and Indonesia are [withdrawing](#) their military transportation support. The German Foreign Ministry spokesman said that the reason for their pledge is their conviction on the importance of stabilizing Mali.

Nigeria:

On 23 October, the Nigerian military confirmed that at least 83 Nigerian soldiers are [missing](#) following an attack by Boko Haram in the northeastern part of the country. Superior firepower by the extremist group forced many of the soldiers to flee on foot into the Niger River where many are feared to have drowned.

This week, the Nigerian government announced that on 31 October it will meet with community leaders from the Niger Delta region as [well](#) as representatives of several of the armed groups fighting in the area in the hopes of ending the fighting in the region. However, on 25 October, the same day as the aforementioned announcement, the Niger Delta Avengers, [one](#) of such armed groups in the Niger River Delta, announced that they had attacked an oil pipeline in the region.

South Sudan:

The head of the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has announced that she will [step](#) down at the end of November after serving as the UN Special Representative to South Sudan for two years. On Monday, she [said](#) that the road ahead for South Sudan would be difficult, but she is hopeful that peace will come to the war-torn country.

Amnesty International [released](#) a report on Monday, examining the serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law carried out by government forces during the breakout of violence in Juba in July. The report is based on over 90 interviews conducted over three months following the re-ignition of the conflict in the country. The witnesses describe ethnic-based killings, rapes, and abuse.

According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), at least 67 aid workers have been [killed](#) since the conflict in South Sudan broke out in 2013. OCHA also reported that more than 640 incidents where humanitarian aid access was blocked were reported in the first nine months of this year. The humanitarian agency condemned the violence and called for a quick response to hold the guilty accountable for their actions.

Over the last several weeks, there [has](#) been an increase of ethnic hate speech and threats of violence, mutilation, and murder in South Sudan. On Wednesday, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a warning that if these incitements of violence are allowed to continue there's a high risk of mass atrocities erupting in the country. He urged the community and top political leaders in the country to take decisive action to ensure no horrendous crimes will be

committed.

On Wednesday, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) [announced](#) in a statement the release of about 145 child soldiers who had been recruited by the Cobra Faction and the SPLA-IO, two armed rebel groups fighting the South Sudanese government. In the statement, UNICEF also noted that approximately 16,000 children are still being held as soldiers in armed groups and called on the parties to cease the recruiting of children to their armies.

Sudan/Darfur:

Sudan Call, the opposition to Sudan's ruling National Congress Party (NCP), has [threatened](#) to initiate a large-scale protest in the coming year with the goal of overthrowing the existing government. The threat follows the opposition's boycott of a National Dialogue agreement amongst the ruling party and its allies that set the groundwork for a future constitution of Sudan. The two parties have been unable to reach an agreement leading to a humanitarian truce and the implementation of requisite confidence building measures.

Syria:

Security developments

A three-day "humanitarian" ceasefire between regime and rebel forces has [broken down](#) as clashes in Aleppo continued over the weekend. The unilateral agreement was announced by the Syrian government and Russia to allow for both residents and rebels to leave the city. However, the agreement did not last long enough for aid agencies to obtain the requisite security agreements necessary to evacuate injured civilians and rebels refused to give up their positions.

The United Kingdom's Minister of Defense [announced](#) on Tuesday that an additional 20 security personnel will be deployed to Syria in an effort to reboot a program to train moderate opposition forces for an upcoming offensive to retake territory from the Islamic State (ISIL). It is suspected that an operation to retake the city of Raqqa will become the focus pending the outcome of the operation to retake Mosul in Iraq.

US-led coalition strikes in Syria have [killed](#) at least 300 civilians since 2014 according to a new report released by Amnesty International on Tuesday. The organization publicly investigated available information such as news reports, satellite imagery, and photo and video evidence related to 11 aerial attacks that have been carried out since September 2014. The US

State Department has not yet responded to Amnesty's inquiry regarding the report.

An airstrike on a school complex in Aleppo [killed](#) at least 35 civilians, including 22 children and 6 teachers, on Wednesday. The attack was a part of a series of strikes conducted by either Russian or Syrian war planes in the city of Idlib. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) expressed outrage over the attack, noting that, if deliberate, the attack should be treated as a war crime.

The humanitarian situation

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator [stated](#) this week that at least 400 civilians, including many children, have been killed in Aleppo in the last month. The statement, delivered to the UN Security Council at a briefing on the crisis in Syria, noted that the UN was unable to deliver humanitarian assistance and coordinate civilian evacuations due to objections from two armed opposition groups.

Political developments

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-UN joint investigative mechanism, also called the Jim, [released](#) a report on Friday confirming that the Syrian government is responsible for an attack in Idlib province in March 2015, which involved the use of chemical weapons. The attack allegedly used a device dropped from a high altitude which released a deadly agent into the air, likely chlorine. Russia has thus far thwarted attempts in the Security Council by the US, France, and the UK to impose sanctions on Syria for the use of chemical weapons in the ongoing crisis.

Yemen:

The Saudi-led coalition [released](#) a statement last week, which said that the Houthi rebels repeatedly violated the 72-hour ceasefire launched at midnight the day before. The truce was supposed to last for three days, but, according to the statement, it had already been breached more than 40 times by the rebels, [leading](#) the Saudi-led coalition to respond by launching missiles on Yemen. Attacks from both sides

[killed](#) at least 11 people on the first day of the truce, including at least three civilians. A government source [said](#)

he was grateful for the efforts of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN envoy, as he tried to broker peace between the rebels and the government, but he also confirmed that the attempt was unsuccessful as the rebels violated the truce several times. On Saturday, the UN envoy

[urged](#) all parties to extend the truce, but the call was not heeded; the ceasefire

[ended](#)

after 72 hours without renewal.

On Tuesday, the UN special envoy to Yemen [handed](#) an outline for a peace plan to the Houthi rebels, who currently hold control in the capital on the country. According to a politician affiliated with the rebels, the plan included relieving the president of his duties and instead implementing a transitional period of one or two years before introducing presidential elections. According to a copy of the proposal [se](#)

[en](#)

by media, the information given by the politician is accurate as the main idea of the proposal seems to be the establishing of a new government containing less divisive people. The day after the delivery of the peace plan the Yemeni army

[attacked](#)

areas held by the rebels.

The UN food relief agency (WFP) has [expressed](#) concerns regarding the deteriorating situation in Yemen as food security is running low and child malnutrition is rising. The regional director of the WFP said that hunger is increasing and “people have exhausted all their survival strategies”. Women and children are the most vulnerable, especially as some areas of the country are difficult to reach for food distribution.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [released](#) a Humanitarian Snapshot this week, showing the impact of the conflict in Yemen. The Snapshot reveals a devastating toll on the population as food insecurity is worsening, health facilities are reaching their limits, and those engaged in the conflict continually breach the rules of international law when it comes to the protection of civilians.

What else is new?

The Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P) has published the latest issue of its premier journal on RtoP, *Global Responsibility to Protect*. This issue, Volume 8, Issue 4, features articles discussing challenges and recommendations for the next UN Secretary-General, the connections between RtoP, refugees, and IDPs, and other important topics on the norm. To read the latest issue please click

[here](#)