

## In the headlines:

- Annan expects full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon by mid-April to mid-May
- Security Council extends life of UN mission in Sudan by another week
- UN voices new alarm over human rights abuses, hunger in Darfur
- UN peacekeeping patrols seize weapons in eastern DR of Congo
- UN mission in DR of Congo suspends or expels civilians in sexual abuse cases, clears three
- Côte d'Ivoire government blocks fuel tankers from northern town, UN mission says
- Chiefs of UN peacekeeping missions meet this week at annual New York retreat
- \$148 million needed to run Afghan parliamentary elections, UN tells donors
- Skin cancer cases rise precipitously due to artificial tanning, UN warns
- UN agency opens environment protection centre in Liberia to educate returning refugees
- Sustainable forest management can help avert conflicts, says UN report
- Brunei Darussalam becomes UNESCO's 191st Member State

*More stories inside*

## **Annan expects full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon by mid-April to mid-May**



Roed-Larsen  
briefs press

**17 March** - United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said today he expected the full withdrawal of all Syrian troops from Lebanon, including the intelligence apparatus and military assets, to take place before the Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled for between mid-April and mid-May.

In a statement issued after he was briefed by his Special Envoy for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559, which calls for withdrawing all foreign forces from Lebanon, disbanding all militias and extending Government control over the whole country, Mr. Annan "stressed the great importance that these elections be free and fair and take place as scheduled."

The envoy, Terje Roed-Larsen, briefed Mr. Annan on his recent meetings in Europe, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, in particular outlining the details of the understanding reached between the UN and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on 12 March in Aleppo, Syria.

Mr. Roed-Larsen told reporters after the briefing that he would return to the region in the first week of April to finalize the report that Mr. Annan is to deliver to the Security Council on 19 April.

Asked whether he had reached any conclusion in his talks with Syrian and Lebanese leaders on disbanding the militias, including Hezbollah, he replied that there was an ongoing dialogue and no conclusions had yet been reached.

He said the understanding he reached with President al-Assad involved two phases: first, the withdrawal by 1 April at the latest of all Syrian troops and intelligence assets to the eastern Bekaa Valley, with two thirds on the Lebanese side and one third in Syria; secondly, the convening by 7 April at the latest of a joint Syrian-Lebanese military committee to decide the precise timelines for the complete and full withdrawal.

The UN envoy noted that there was now a movement of military equipment into the Bekaa Valley and "we have been observing over the last few days that intelligence offices have been closed down, including the intelligence headquarters in Beirut."

Asked whether he told Mr. al-Assad that he would face sanctions if he did not comply, Mr. Roed-Larsen said the topic was not on the agenda.

## Security Council extends life of UN mission in Sudan by another week



UN Security Council in session

**17 March** - The Security Council voted today to extend the mandate of the United Nations Advance Mission in Sudan (UNAMIS) by a week – the second time it has done so this month – while its members discuss plans to set up a peacekeeping mission in the south of the country and outline measures to encourage peace in the war-torn Darfur region in the west.

The Council's 15 members unanimously adopted a resolution that maintains UNAMIS until 24 March, after its mandate had been originally due to expire today. Last Thursday the mandate was also extended by a week.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has proposed the creation of a peacekeeping force comprised of at least 10,000 military personnel in southern Sudan to help the vast region stabilize after the Sudanese Government and local rebel forces signed a peace agreement in January ending their 21-year civil war.

The new mission – which would replace UNAMIS – is projected to cost more than \$1 billion to establish and run during its first 12 months of operation.

Council members are also still debating what measures should be contained in a resolution on the situation in Darfur, where many tens of thousands of people have been killed and nearly 2 million others displaced from their homes since rebels took up arms against Government forces, later backed by local militias, in early 2003.

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Sudan Jan Pronk is travelling to Luxembourg to hold talks with European Union defence ministers about mobilizing support for the African Union's (AU) ceasefire monitoring force in Darfur and for the upcoming UN peacekeeping mission.

A team led by the AU has arrived in the Sudanese capital Khartoum after completing an in-field assessment of peacekeeping requirements in Darfur. The team met Mr. Pronk before he left for Luxembourg and they will now head to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to issue their report.

## UN voices new alarm over human rights abuses, hunger in Darfur

**17 March** - United Nations agencies are voicing renewed alarm over human rights abuses and looming hunger in western Sudan's Darfur region, where tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and almost 2 million forced from their homes in fighting between the Sudanese Government, allied militias and rebels.



"If the vow that the international community will 'never again' stand idly by while crimes against humanity are being perpetrated is to have any meaning, now is the time for decisive action," 15 UN

human rights experts said in a statement yesterday in Geneva.

“The violations in Darfur have been staggering in scale and harrowing in nature. Extra-judicial executions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearances, scorching of villages and forced displacement of civilians have taken place in a widespread and systematic manner and continue on a daily basis.

“Members of civil society who have sought to address the violence in Darfur have suffered arbitrary arrests, detention, torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the security forces, typically after publishing reports of human rights violations in Darfur,” they added.

The experts strongly endorsed the recent findings of an international commission of inquiry that a host of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both sides, but mostly by Government or allied forces be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

“Strong, concrete and effective measures are urgently needed to bring to a close what is widely acknowledged to be one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today,” they concluded, noting that past Security Council resolutions on Darfur have been repeatedly violated without penalty.

“It is past time to send a clear message that the international community has forged a unified commitment to bring an end to serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Darfur and to the impunity that has enabled them to continue.”

In a dispatch from the field on hunger after visiting camps for displaced people, UN World Food Programme (WFP) public information officer Laura Melo reported that some now anticipated a much higher number of people in need of food aid during the July-September rainy season than the original agency peak figure of 2.8 million.

“Darfur is facing the grim prospect of worsening hunger,” she wrote. “With the continued displacement and prevailing economic hardship, more and more people are likely to find themselves with nothing to feed their children.”

Women in the camps are terrified of going out to collect firewood or grass to sell amid talk of armed men on camels harassing those who do venture out, she said.

“Humanitarian agencies, meanwhile, continue to race against time to reach those in need,” she added. “Every day, hundreds of trucks and aeroplanes are on the move to deliver much-needed food aid. Insecurity, bad roads, a lack of funds and a consequent lack of capacity are, however, major obstacles to the Herculean task of delivering an average of 30,000 to 40,000 metric tons of food a month.

“It can take as long as four months for food contributions from abroad to reach Port Sudan, and two more months for the commodities to reach Darfur. With the rainy season approaching, the pressure is even greater.”

With large areas of West Darfur likely to be cut off during the rainy season an additional 23,000 tons of food need to be moved to be ready for distribution when the rains start. But WFP is short of funds to purchase all the food required and sufficient trucks to transport it.

In West Darfur, UN agencies continue to restrict their movements to El Geneina town due to security concerns.

In a report on the overall food situation in Africa's largest country, WFP warned that many poor people may be short of food due to a poor cereal harvest and high prices of basic staples.

WFP Sudan Country Director Ramiro Lopes da Silva said that so far the agency did not have enough food to provide for the 5.5 million people in need in 2005. If the numbers continue to rise, Sudan will face a new catastrophe unless more food gets here fast, he added.

## UN peacekeeping patrols seize weapons in eastern DR of Congo

**17 March** - United Nations peacekeepers seized weapons and ammunition in the northeastern Ituri region as they, backed by helicopter gun ships, conducted their regular cordon and search operations designed to force militias to flee, or reduce "their capacity for nuisance," the mission said today.



About 500 peacekeepers from four companies, comprising troops from the Bangladeshi, Pakistani, South African, Moroccan and Nepalese contingents, carried out Operation Djugu VI yesterday near the town of Zombe in Zombe district. No contact occurred between the forces of the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC) and militiamen, but weapons and ammunition were discovered and seized, it said.

Zombe is the suspected headquarters of the Nationalist Integrationist Front (FNI) militia, dominated by ethnic Lendu fighters.

Djugu is one of the five administrative territories of the Ituri district. Since last December it has been the scene of looting and extortion against civilians as clashes between Lendu and Hema militias over land worsened, forcing some 80,000 civilians to flee their homes.

According to a MONUC report last year, departing Belgian colonists, who had leased land from Lendu traditional chiefs in Ituri, left it during political upheavals in 1973 in the care of Hema managers. The managers began illegally and secretly to register the land in their own names, especially when a Hema, Zbo Kalogi, became Minister of Agriculture, the report said.

## UN mission in DR of Congo suspends or expels civilians in sexual abuse cases, clears three

**17 March** - Seventeen civilians in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have been investigated on allegations of sexual exploitation, of which three cases have been closed for lack of evidence and one is still being reviewed, a UN spokesman said today.

"One person was summarily dismissed and is currently being prosecuted in France. One resigned rather than face disciplinary procedures," Fred Eckhard said at the daily briefing for journalists at UN Headquarters in New York. "Six have been suspended without pay pending disciplinary action."

Five were UN Volunteers, he said, and their cases have been referred to the UN Development Programme, of which UNV is a part.

UN peacekeepers are forbidden to consort with the local people they are there to serve.

With reference to one of the three cases closed, Mr. Eckhard made clear that "no grounds for initiating disciplinary procedures were found" against Jacques Grinberg, the former chief of staff of the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC), and said the investigation had ended.

Mr. Grinberg was told this on 14 January, the spokesman said.

## Côte d'Ivoire government blocks fuel tankers from northern town, UN mission says

**17 March** - The town of Boua in northeastern Côte d'Ivoire lacks electricity and pumped water because Government forces have blocked the main road to the town for the past two weeks, the United Nations mission in the West African nation said today.

The Government forces, FANCI, were stationed at a town within the zone of confidence (ZOC) separating the Government-controlled south from the rebel-held north, the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) said.

FANCI has continued to deny passage to fuel tankers heading to Bouna, the mission said.

## Chiefs of UN peacekeeping missions meet this week at annual New York retreat

**17 March** - The heads of the 18 United Nations peacekeeping missions will hold their annual meeting, starting tomorrow, to exchange experiences and opinions on integrating former combatants into communities and on their own management and accountability.



Sixteen heads of mission will attend the three-day meeting in Glen Cove, New York, while two missions will be represented by principal deputies.

"The conference provides an opportunity for the UN's senior field leadership to interact directly with each other and their counterparts from Headquarters, and provide a forum for an informal exchange of information and opinions on issues of common concern," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said at the daily Headquarters briefing in New York.

Against the background of the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, they are scheduled to discuss strengthening the management and accountability processes of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), as well as ways to create a clearer and more effective division of labour in complex, multidimensional peacekeeping operations.

They will also review disciplinary procedures and proposals.

The UN has instituted a zero-tolerance policy on sexual liaisons by civilian and military personnel during peacekeeping missions. Should a UN investigation of allegations find evidence of wrongdoing, the offenders are repatriated for disciplinary action by their home Governments.

## \$148 million needed to run Afghan parliamentary elections, UN tells donors



**17 March** - Afghanistan's electoral authorities need some \$148 million in funding to ensure that national and local parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year are conducted fairly and transparently, the United Nations has told a donor conference in the capital Kabul.

The United States has already announced it will contribute \$12 million to help organize the polls for the National Assembly and the provincial Councils, Ariane Quantier, a spokesperson for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), told reporters today.

She said the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB), the commission charged with preparing and conducting the elections, estimates nearly 8,000 staff will be needed in the lead-up to the polls, with a further 180,000 people required to work on or around the day of voting.

The JEMB is forecasting there will be as many as 10,000 candidates for the National Assembly – comprised of the lower house, or house of the people (Wolesi Jirga), and the upper house, or house of elders (Meshrano Jirga) – and the provincial councils. Up to 40 million ballots are expected to be distributed.

Yesterday's donor conference follows an earlier meeting between the JEMB and political party leaders about determining the most appropriate date this year to hold the elections.

The JEMB is comprised of four international election experts and the nine-member Afghan Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). After the elections are held, the IEC will assume full responsibility for the running of the country's future elections.

## Skin cancer cases rise precipitously due to artificial tanning, UN warns

**17 March** - As large numbers of people, especially young women in developed countries, prepare to get an artificial tan in readiness for summer, the United Nations health agency today underscored the heightened risk of skin cancer from such sunbeds, warning that nobody under age 18 should use them and urging stronger state regulation.



“There has been mounting concern over the past several years that people and in particular, teenagers are using sunbeds excessively to acquire tans which are seen as socially desirable,” World Health Organization (WHO) Assistant Director-General for environmental health Dr. Kerstin Leitner said. “However, the consequence of this sunbed usage has been a precipitous rise in the number of skin cancer cases.

“We are therefore calling attention to this fact and we would hope that this recommendation will inspire regulatory authorities to adopt stricter controls on the usage of sunbeds,” Dr. Leitner added, noting that childhood exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation either from the sun or sunbeds is known to increase the risk of developing melanoma later.

With an estimated 132,000 annual cases of and 66,000 deaths from malignant melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer, some sunbeds have the capacity to emit UV levels many times stronger than the mid-day summer sun in most countries. Yet only a few countries, such as Belgium, France or Sweden, have sunbed regulations.

“As long as sunbeds are available to the public, there is a need for guidelines or legislation to reduce the risks associated with their use,” the agency said. “WHO encourages governments to formulate and enforce effective laws.”

Growing use, along with the desire and fashion to have a tan, are seen as the prime reason behind the fast growth in skin cancers in such countries as Norway and Sweden, where the annual incidence of melanoma is estimated to have tripled in the last 45 years, or in the United States, where the rate has doubled in the last 30 years.

Beyond skin cancers, some of the main consequences of excess UV exposure include eye damage and premature skin ageing and reduced effectiveness of the immune system, possibly leading to a greater risk of infectious diseases. Acute effects on the eye include cataracts, pterygium – a white coloured growth over the cornea – and inflammations such as photokeratitis and photoconjunctivitis. This is why protective goggles are recommended when using a sunbed.

Only in very rare and specific cases should medically-supervised sunbed use be considered, such as for treating certain skin conditions like dermatitis and psoriasis, and then only under qualified medical supervision in an approved medical clinic, not unsupervised in commercial tanning premises or at home, WHO warned.

## UN agency opens environment protection centre in Liberia to educate returning refugees



Returnees at environment centre in Liberia

**17 March** - As tens of thousands of Liberians return to their battle-scarred nation, the United Nations refugee agency has opened an environmental protection agency to educate them on how to revive the natural surroundings as they look for farmland, timber and charcoal, or mine gold and diamonds.

“These needs are realistic as they affect the lives of all Liberians on a day-to-day basis. In areas where the environment has been severely degraded, this (repatriation) will bring additional pressure to bear on an already strained environment,” the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative in Liberia, Moses Okello, said when he inaugurated the centre recently.



At the centre, returnees, their communities and students in some schools will be shown how to plant trees in degraded areas and sustain tree plantations and woodlots. They will also be taught fuel conservation methods and how to produce and use “eco-stoves,” which, with combustion chambers and insulation, use about 40 per cent of the energy usually consumed in cooking.

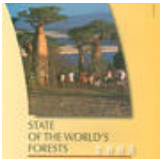
Centre workers will also guide partner agencies in incorporating environmental issues in their reintegration programmes, UNHCR said.

The agency said it will enlist the help of local leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community development committees in the target areas and set up environmental clubs in 30 schools across the country.

“Changing people’s attitudes and behaviour remains a major challenge and this takes time and patience,” Mr. Okello said.

UNHCR said it expected to build four more environmental protection centres this year.

## Sustainable forest management can help avert conflicts, says UN report



**17 March** - Sustainable use of the world’s forests not only creates employment and generates income but also can help avert the emergence of conflicts and promote rehabilitation where conflicts have erupted, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said today.

On the other hand, marginalization of forestry in social and economic development may actually fuel armed conflicts, FAO said in the 2005 edition of *The State of the World’s Forests* (SOFO 2005), a report presented to the Ministerial Meeting on Forests in Rome.

“There is so much about forested regions today that makes them perfectly primed to play host to war,” FAO Assistant Director-General of Forestry Hosny El-Lakany said.

“It is in the forest where one often finds poor, isolated populations who are either ignored or mistreated and may need little encouragement to take up arms, and where there is usually valuable timber, minerals, oil and land that can easily be the source of tension. There is also the simple fact that forests can provide refuge, funds and food for fighters,” he added.

“When wars do break out, forest issues can offer a path to peace,” said David Kaimowitz, Director-General of the Jakarta, Indonesia-based Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and author of the chapter in the report entitled “Forests and War, Forests and Peace.”

“Attention to forestry problems need not wait until hostilities have ceased. Even in the bitter Rwandan civil war both sides agreed to take steps to avoid killing endangered gorillas. When Colombia’s Government negotiated with anti-government rebels several years ago, forestry and related environmental issues figured prominently in the talks.”

The gross value added by the forest sector amounted to \$354 billion globally in 2000, or about 1.2 per cent of the gross domestic product, a decline from 1.6 per cent in 1990.

“Economic viability in a broad sense is necessary to enable wider adoption of sustainable forest management,” Mr. El-Lakany, said. “And where forests are managed primarily to provide environmental services, society should be willing to bear the costs. This would help towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of alleviating poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability, two sides of the same coin.”

Producing primary forest products alone is unlikely to enhance economic benefits, the study noted. Much will depend on the ability to move up the value chain, taking advantage of the emerging market opportunities in wood processing, such as the production of furniture. The share of gross value added by forests in some countries remains very low, notwithstanding the large extent of the forests involved, due to limited success in developing an efficient wood processing sector.

## Brunei Darussalam becomes UNESCO's 191st Member State

**17 March** - Brunei Darussalam today became the 191st member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the specialized agency founded in 1945 to serve as a laboratory of ideas, a standard-setter for universal accords on ethical issues and a clearinghouse for sharing information and knowledge.

"Brunei Darussalam brings special strengths to UNESCO's work through its promotion of sustainable development and cross-cultural dialogue and peace," the agency's Director-General, Koïchiro Matsuura, said in welcoming the small southeast Asian nation of just more than 350,000 inhabitants.

"Indeed, Calak Brunei, Cara Brunei or the Brunei Way of conflict resolution – emphasizing dialogue and compromise – is a contribution to the promotion of peace that the world at large can benefit from," he added, noting that with today's accession UNESCO is very close to achieving full universality.

"I look forward to the day when UNESCO will be able to count every single member of the international community in its ranks," he declared.

The accession to the Paris-based organization was formalized when Brunei Darussalam's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Pengiran Haji Yunus Pengiran Haji Mahmud, signed UNESCO's constitution.

## UNESCO deplores 'tragic frequency' of murder of journalists in Philippines

**17 March** - Condemning the murder of two more Philippine journalists in just over two weeks, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) today deplored the "tragic frequency" with which journalists are assassinated in the southeast Asian country.



Romeo Sanchez, a broadcaster at DZNL radio in San Fernando City, was shot dead by a gunman on 9 March in a market in Baguio, while Arnulfo Villanueva, a columnist for the Asian Start Express Balita community newspaper, was found shot dead on 28 February on a road in the town of Naic.

"The use of assassination to silence journalists is a grievous attack on democracy," UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura said. "It deprives society as a whole of the fundamental human right to freedom of expression and cannot be tolerated. Free and open debate is an essential component of democracy, which has no place for political assassination."

Calling on the Philippines' authorities to do all they can to bring the culprits to justice, he added: "It is only through swift and determined action against those who use violence to silence the media that the tragic frequency with which journalists are assassinated in the Philippines can be reduced."

According to the World Association of Newspapers (WAN), at least eight journalists died in the Philippines last year "in circumstances suggesting that they may have been killed for exercising their profession."

UNESCO's mandate includes the defence of freedom of expression and press freedom, and it has issued numerous denunciations of violence against journalists around the world in recent years.