

UN rails against Syria's "monstrous campaign of annihilation" in Eastern Ghouta

The United Nations is [pleading](#) for a halt to one of the deadliest air assault campaigns of the Syrian conflict, as Syrian government forces have reportedly continued to attack Eastern Ghouta for over five straight days, killing more than 335 civilians, in what the UN has called a "massacre". On 19 February, Syrian forces [intensified](#) their bombardment of the last remaining rebel-held enclave near the capital, allegedly indiscriminately killing more than 100 civilians that day alone, and marking one of the deadliest attacks in three years. Moreover, in just the past few days, Syrian government forces and its allies have reportedly [conducted](#) 420 airstrikes and dropped 140 barrel bombs in Eastern Ghouta. While the Syrian government [claims](#) that there are few civilians left in Eastern Ghouta, according to the UN, almost 400,000 people remain [trapped](#) in the area.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres [maintains](#) that the Syrian government's bombing campaign has turned Eastern Ghouta into "hell on earth" and has called for an immediate halt to the fighting. Similarly, both Panos Moutziz, the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, as well as High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al-Husseini, have [urged](#) all parties to strictly adhere to their international humanitarian obligations and to take all feasible measures to protect civilians. They have further [underscored](#) that "International humanitarian law was developed precisely to stop this type of situation, where civilians are slaughtered in droves in order to fulfill political or military objectives". The High Commissioner [railed](#) at the "monstrous campaign of annihilation".

Earlier this month, Sweden and Kuwait [introduced](#) a draft resolution, requesting that the UN Security Council (UNSC) vote "as soon as possible" on the proposed 30-day ceasefire in Syria, which would allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical evacuation. During intense negotiations and in a concession to Russia, the draft resolution was later amended to specify that the proposed ceasefire would not apply to the Islamic State (ISIL) or Al-Qaeda. The UNSC

vote, which was originally scheduled for Thursday, was later delayed and set to take place on Friday, 23 February.

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On 23 February, a bomb [killed](#) two people and injured 22 others at a bank in the northern city of Lashio. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, but violent incidents carried out by armed ethnic groups are not uncommon in the northern part of the country. UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee warned in a statement this month of the need to focus not only on the Rohingya crisis, but to also focus on the general ethnic strife of the country.

The Canadian government has [imposed](#) sanctions on Burmese General Maung Maung Soe, citing his alleged complicity in the violations of rights of the Rohingya population. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland also stated that the acts committed against the Rohingya constitute ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The European Union (EU) is also [preparing](#) sanctions against Burmese generals involved in the systematic abuse of human rights against the Rohingya, Reuters has reported. European diplomats also announced the EU's desire to strengthen the arms-embargo currently in place on Burma.

Burma has [agreed](#) to resettle the 6,000 Rohingya stranded in no man's land, an unclaimed piece of land near the Tombru border between Burma and Bangladesh. While most of the Rohingya refugees have fled to the Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh, some are stranded in this area as a result of the Bangladeshi government denying their entrance to the country. The decision comes after Bangladeshi and Burmese authorities visited the impromptu camps to encourage Rohingya refugees to return to Burma.

Burundi:

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UN Development Programme Representative to Burundi Garry Coville [reported](#) that one in three Burundian people will require humanitarian assistance in 2018, a 20 percent increase from last year's needs. Coville stated that the socio-economic situation in the country, as well as the increase of natural disasters, will exacerbate the need for humanitarian aid.

Opposition groups in Burundi are [accusing](#) the government of allegedly intimidating and forcing citizens to register to vote in the upcoming constitutional referendum. The government has allegedly set up checkpoints, mostly run by the party's youth militia wing, the Imbonerakure, to verify registration papers. Other residents stated that local authorities have allegedly threatened to withhold fertilizers and not provide health insurance validation if citizens are not registered. Burundi's First Vice President acknowledged that some members of the Imbonerakure might have abused their power, but denied any other allegations.

Central African Republic:

Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), [called](#) on the international community to increase its support to the humanitarian response in the Central African Republic (CAR) after her visit to the country. While the funding for humanitarian programs has decreased in the last three years, the number of internally displaced persons in the country has doubled to 694,000 in the last year. Mueller emphasized the need to strengthen the protection of civilians during her meetings with national authorities and key stakeholders. Independent Expert on the human rights situation in the CAR Marie-Thérèse Keita Bocoum also [urged](#) for an open dialogue between factions, the need to establish judicial mechanisms, and for an increase in humanitarian assistance in the country, citing the 2.2 million people in need of aid.

Democratic Republic of the Congo:

The Independent National Electoral Commission (Ceni) of the DRC has [revealed](#) new electronic voting machines for the upcoming referendum later this year. The machines will allow the voter to touch the photo of a candidate, which then prints a marked ballot paper that the voter must place inside a ballot box. Additionally, the machines are only available in French, the official language of the country, but not in the four other recognized national languages. Opposition groups, however, have rejected the machines, citing concerns over easy manipulation of votes. The Catholic Church has called on the government to allow international experts to certify the machines, while the US firmly opposes an electronic vote.

Switzerland has [imposed](#) sanctions on 14 individuals allied with the DRC's President Joseph Kabila. These sanctions, which include asset freezes and travel bans, largely replicate the sanctions already imposed by the European Union.

On 20 February, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [warned](#) of a looming humanitarian disaster of colossal proportions in the southeastern area of the DRC. The province of Tanganyika has been the stage of conflict and violence between different ethnic groups as well as between government and militia forces, with UNHCR partners reporting 800 protection incidents in just the first two weeks of February. The atrocities include attacks against villages, abductions, and gender-based violence, including rape. Head of Operations for the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) Jean-Philippe Chauzy has also [raised](#) concerns over the dire humanitarian situation in the DRC, stating that the international community cannot stay dormant to the country's situation. Chauzy reported that malnutrition levels in the Kasai province have risen by 750 percent as a result of the constant displacement

due to violence. In response, the European Commission, alongside the UN and the Dutch government, will

[co-host](#)

a donor conference on 13 April focusing on funding for humanitarian relief in the DRC.

Over the weekend, unidentified armed men [killed](#) two aid workers and kidnapped another one in the eastern province of North Kivu in the DRC, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported. The workers were part of the NGO Hydraulique sans Frontières, which provides technical support in water-related projects in developing countries. OCHA warned of the security situation in the region, citing the 2017 December attack when a rebel group killed 15 UN Peacekeepers and injured 53 others.

Gaza / West Bank:

During a briefing to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [warned](#) that no Plan B exists for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, affirming the UN's support to a two-state solution. In the same meeting, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process Nikolay Mladenov called on the international community to continue to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), while also urging for the return of control over Gaza to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Mahmoud Abbas, President of the PA, who was also present at the meeting,

[proposed](#)

an international peace conference later this year to solve the situation. However, Israeli Ambassador Danny Danon stated that the only way to solve the problem is through direct negotiations between the two parties.

On 21 February, Egypt [re-opened](#) the Rafah crossing point along its border with Gaza for four days only. While thousands of Gaza residents are on the authorized travel list, mainly composed of medical patients and students, it is likely that only a few thousand will make it out in the allotted time.

After a rocket fired from Gaza [hit](#) the southern part of Israel over the weekend, Israeli warplanes struck 18 Hamas facilities on Monday, 19 February. No casualties were reported, but the exchange is seen as the most serious escalation since 2014. Hamas officials, however, have stated they do not wish for a further escalation of the situation.

Iraq:

The Islamic State (ISIL) [claimed](#) responsibility for a deadly attack against Iraq's Shiite-led Popular Mobilization Units on 19 February, killing at least 27 people southwest of Kirkuk.

ICRtoP member Human Rights Watch (HRW) [reported](#) that on 19 February, a court in Baghdad convicted 11 women from Turkey and one woman from Azerbaijan for non-violent crimes under Iraq's counter-terrorism law, sentencing ten to life in prison and one to death. Six months ago, approximately 1,400 foreign women and children, along with ISIL fighters, surrendered to Iraqi security forces. Charges leveled against these women include: entering Iraq illegally; aiding or abetting ISIL; and membership in ISIL. Despite these defendants having access to lawyers during interrogations, unlike earlier cases, HRW maintains that their trials were unfair. Additionally, HRW claims that in these cases, the women received the harshest possible sentences for what appears to be either marriage to an ISIL member or a coerced border crossing. Accordingly, HRW asserts that Iraqi authorities ought to develop a national prosecutorial strategy and prioritize prosecuting those accused of being most responsible for the most serious crimes. To that end, HRW is of the view that authorities should consider alternatives to criminal prosecution for those suspected only of membership in ISIL, without any evidence of other serious crime.

Libya:

Seven years after Libya's revolution, the humanitarian crisis in the country continues to [persis](#)
[t](#) and the forecast for 2018 is bleak. Current events, including the elections tentatively scheduled for late 2018, have the potential to reignite an armed conflict rather than lead to a unified Libya, especially in the absence of a constitution and the fact that no single faction appears strong enough to stabilize the country. Indeed, it seems that election-related violence has already begun. Moreover, this power vacuum and the looming possibility of returning to civil war, creates fertile ground for the Islamic State (ISIL) and Al Qaeda-aligned groups to recover from their 2016 and 2017 setbacks and return time and again. According to reports, ISIL is already rising again, and currently disrupting oil production and expanding its reach southward. Additionally, ISIL is allegedly using Libya as its primary base in Africa, where it receives foreign fighters from Europe and the Middle east, and from where it plans and coordinates attacks against the West. Disarray in the country could also make the humanitarian situation even worse, by preserving a slavery economy, destabilizing neighboring states, and intensifying migration to Europe.

Mali:

Infighting between the government of Mali and ethnic Tuaregs in the north over which side is responsible for the failure to produce security or economic benefits for the northern tribe could [lead](#)

to civil war. This could in turn create an opening for terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), to further entrench their operations in northern Mali.

In central Mali, nearly 400 schools have already [closed](#) since Islamist militants expanded their operations and attacks toward the more densely populated Segou and Mopti regions. It also appears that the jihadists are targeting French schools, claiming they “want Koranic schools” instead. Worse still, it seems as though the campaign of violence is gaining support from local communities who feel that they have been marginalized by the government, which they also view as ineffective. Fatou Dieng Thiam, who heads the UN mission’s office in Mopti claims that in addition to militants organizing prayer sessions and telling people to stop paying government taxes, the militants are also “threaten[ing] every symbol of the state: teachers, administrative officers, mayors.” ICRtoP partner Human Rights Watch (HRW) has also documented several cases of rights violations where Malian forces have been involved in their own violations which is creating its own unique cycle of violence.

Nigeria:

Four years after Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok, Boko Haram militants [attacked](#) a school in Dapchi, Yobe State on 19 February. While it was originally thought that the students and teachers fled before Boko Haram arrived, three days after the attack at least 13 girls are still missing and two were found dead. However, officials have been reluctant to call this a kidnapping, as about 76 of the girls who had fled were later found hiding in surrounding villages, so officials say it may still be possible to find those who are still missing. Still, one parent told the BBC they had seen a truck full of students being taken away. Security services continue to search the area to locate the missing girls.

On 19 February, Nigeria’s justice ministry said that 205 Boko Haram suspects had been [convicted](#) on charges related to their involvement with the militant Islamist group. The mass trial marks the end of the second stage of the country’s largest legal challenge against Boko Haram. Jail terms range from three to 60 years. Rights groups have criticized how the Nigerian authorities have handled some of these cases, claiming that some detainees had been held without trial since 2010. Still, the justice ministry also noted that 526 people allegedly affiliated with Boko Haram were released for rehabilitation and said that 73 cases were adjourned.

South Sudan:

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [estimates](#) that approximately 200,000 refugees from South Sudan will arrive in Sudan during 2018. As the five-year conflict continues, OCHA warns of the need for a long-term strategy, rather than just an emergency response. The organization emphasized plans to provide more durable infrastructure to refugee camps and assistance to host communities.

Two clans in the eastern state of Jonglei in South Sudan have [reached](#) a peace agreement, ending a violent conflict over land that has killed 37 people in the past two months. The parties agreed to create a buffer zone, where government security forces will keep the two clans apart.

The South Sudan Peace talks [failed](#) to reach an agreement by 16 February as was previously hoped. Hirut Zemene, deputy chair of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Council of Ministers reported that arranging security and sharing responsibility were the two major items under consideration. While no specific date for continuing the peace talks has been set, Zemene hoped that the break would be short and that talks would resume soon, so as to maintain the momentum and finalize pending issues. However, the government delegation, after its return to Juba, [reiterated](#) its rejection to the proposals presented by the opposition forces and blamed them for stalling the talks. The government particularly opposed the plan to dissolve the security sector and transfer power to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and to the Regional Protection Force. On the other hand, the opposition forces [blamed](#) the government for the failure of the peace talks, citing the government's strict demands such as refusing to demilitarize Juba and rejecting to reconstruct the army. On 21 February, more than 200 civil society groups [issued](#) a statement urging the IGAD, the African Union, and the international community to increase pressure on all parties to reach an agreement in the next phase of negotiations in March.

A new UN report [exposed](#) the "chilling effect" on freedom of expression in South Sudan, citing 60 confirmed incidents where journalists had either been killed, beaten, or arrested. The report also described the restrictions placed upon media outlets, including blocked websites and denying entry to 20 foreign reporters. The head of UNMISS, David Shearer, further reported that the journalists and entities who were targeted were deemed to be critical of the government.

Sudan:

The Governor of Central Darfur Ja'afar Abdel-Hakam [announced](#) that a security forum would take place in Nertiti next month, bringing together the security committees of North, South and Central Darfur. The purpose of the forum will be to discuss security issues and the impact of the disarmament campaign in the region. Sudan's Vice President Abdel-Rahman also [reported](#)

that large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees have returned to Darfur, following an improved security situation in the country. He urged the committee in charge of overseeing the return to provide more assistance to all five states in Darfur. Additionally, during Pramila Patten's visit to Darfur, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict

[commended](#)

the efforts of the government to end sexual violence in the area. However while meeting with Ms. Patten, Special Prosecutor of Darfur Crimes, Al-Fatih Mohamed Tayfor,

[accused](#)

the United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) of allegedly hiding Mission staff involved in sexual offenses.

On 18 February, the Sudanese government [released](#) over 80 political opponents and activists who partook in the protests over the rising prices of bread last month. The opposition party, the National Umma Party (NUP), welcomed the release but called on the government to release the remaining detainees, and also called for the repeal of laws that restrict the freedom of expression and assembly. The NUP also

[accused](#)

the government of holding the remaining detainees as hostages, citing the Sudanese government's press statement announcing that the remaining prisoners would be released as long as the demonstrations and vandalism stopped in the country. ICRtoP member Human Rights Watch (HRW) also

[urged](#)

the government to release the remaining detainees, and noted that Sudanese groups monitoring the release reported that only 50 people were released, not 80 as the government claimed.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/North led by al Hilu (SPLM-N al-Hilu) allegedly [attacked](#)

SPLM-N forces led by Agar (SPLM-N Agar) in the Blue Nile state on Saturday 17 February. The two factions used to be part of a united opposition force against the Sudanese government until they clashed last year over the right to self-determination and other organizational issues.

The Enough Project in Sudan [distributed](#) an open letter to UN commissioners citing issues with the Sudanese government's suppression of peaceful protests, arbitrary arrests, and detentions. The letter asked the UN commissioners to request the Sudanese government to respect their citizens' right to protest and to refrain from using force against protesters. In addition, the letter also asked that the Sudanese government allow detainees legal counsel and family visitation rights. The Enough Project and the other signatories to the letter have also requested that the government conduct an immediate, independent and impartial investigation into all allegations of excessive use of force against peaceful protesters and into the ill-treatment

and torture of the detainees.

Syria:

Seven years of conflict in Syria has [left](#) more than 465,000 dead, over 1,000,000 injured, and at least 12,000,000 displaced.

On 16 February, the US and Turkey [agreed](#) to hold talks in order to de-escalate the situation in Syria, particularly to avoid clashes in the northern city of Manbij. Previously, Turkey had said it would attack US-backed Kurdish forces in the city, while the US had threatened of an aggressive response.

On 20 February, Syria's "Popular Forces" [entered](#) Afrin to counter Turkey's attack against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), raising the possibility of clashes between Syria and Turkey. While Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Mr. Bekir Bozdağ has apparently [warned](#) Syria of "disastrous consequences" should the Syrian government send forces to support the YPG, Syria's government has [called](#) Turkey's offensive on Afrin a "blatant attack" on its sovereignty.

Venezuela:

On 20 February, Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) [called](#) on Member States to impose harsher sanctions on Venezuela, including sanctions "against the regime itself". Until now, sanctions had focused only on individual members of the Venezuelan government.

The Democratic Unity Roundtable, a coalition of Venezuelan opposition parties, [announced](#) on 21 February that they would not participate in the presidential election scheduled for 22 April. The opposition stated that the election lacked the necessary conditions for a free and fair result, and further claimed that the election was premature and that it was intended to provide a mirage of legitimacy to President Nicolás Maduro's government. President Maduro responded by announcing his intentions to also hold municipal and state legislative council elections the same day. The opposition stated that it would reconsider its decision if certain conditions were met.

According to a closely-watched university study, Venezuelans [lost](#) on average 11 kilograms in body weight during 2017 as compared to only 8 kilograms during 2016. The study, which was conducted by three Venezuelan universities, provides one of the few statistical analyses of the economic crisis and food shortage in the country, amid a government information void. The report also stated that over 69 percent of Venezuelans have said they have woken up hungry in the previous three months because of lack of funds to buy food.

Yemen:

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On 16 February, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres [announced](#) the appointment of Martin Griffiths of the United Kingdom as his Special Envoy for Yemen.

A proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is [occurring](#) in Yemen. On 20 February, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley

[asserted](#)

that a United Nations

[report](#)

had “identified missile remnants, related military equipment and military unmanned aerial vehicles that are of Iranian origin and were brought into Yemen after the imposition of the targeted arms embargo”, demanding that the Security Council act. Apparently, Reuters has

[seen](#)

a draft UN resolution, which urges the Security Council to take action against Iran over sanctions violations and which also urges the Security Council to condemn Iran for failing to stop its ballistic missiles from falling into the hands of Yemen’s Houthi rebel group. Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani has

[rejected](#)

the accusations against Iran, and Russia appears to have

[opposed](#)

a bid to condemn Iran.

Battlefield losses have [pushed](#) Houthis to public conscription, annulling voluntary recruitment. Houthi militia leaders are set to review and possibly simplify conditions for recruitment. According to observers, the “simplification” of terms could include abolishing age limits and allowing children to join.

On 21 February, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) [called](#) on the United Kingdom, as the penholder on Yemen at the Security Council, to either demonstrate that it can lead the Council

to take meaningful action on Yemen, or hand over the responsibility to another Council member. Suze van Meegen, NRC's Protection and Advocacy Adviser on Yemen, further asserted that "Another weak presidential statement will have little effect on the ground, if any at all" and went on to say that "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world deserves more than just an 'expression of concern'." In that regard, the NRC maintains that the Security Council should break its eight-month silence on Yemen by adopting a binding resolution in which it demands a complete lifting of the blockade and a cessation of hostilities.