

UNICEF: One in Six Children Live in Conflict Zones



Displaced children at a camp in war-torn Sudan

NEW YORK (Dispatches) – About 473 million, or more than one in six children, are estimated to live in conflict areas worldwide, according to the United Nations children's agency.

UNICEF's statement came on Saturday as conflicts continue to rage around the world, including in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, among other places.

In the Zionist regime's devastating war on Gaza in particular, at least 17,492 children have reportedly been killed in nearly 15 months of conflict that has reduced much of the enclave to rubble.

"By almost every measure, 2024 has been one of the worst years on record for children in conflict in UNICEF's history – both in terms of the number of children affected and the level of impact on their lives," said UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell.

According to Russell, a child growing up in a conflict zone is far more likely to be out of school, malnourished, or forced from their home compared with a child living in places with no conflict.

"This must not be the new normal. We cannot allow a generation of children to become collateral damage to

the world's unchecked wars," the director said.

The proportion of children living in areas of conflict has doubled – from about 10 percent in the 1990s to almost 19 percent today, UNICEF said.

According to the report, 47.2 million children were displaced due to conflict and violence by the end of 2023.

The trends for 2024 indicate a further increase in displacement because various conflicts have intensified, including in Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, the Palestinian territories and Sudan.

Additionally, in the latest available data, from 2023, the UN verified a record 32,990 grave violations against 22,557 children – the highest number since UN Security Council-mandated monitoring began, UNICEF said.

There is an overall upward trend in the number of grave violations, with this year likely to see another increase, as "thousands of children have been killed and injured in Gaza, and in Ukraine", the agency said.

Sexual violence against children has surged, their education has been affected, children's malnutrition rates have risen and armed conflicts have taken a larger toll on children's mental health, UNICEF also reported.

"The world is failing these children. As we look towards 2025, we must do more to turn the tide and save and improve the lives of children," Russell said.

Putin Apologizes to Aliyev

Several Airlines Cancel Flights to Russia After Azerbaijan Airlines Crash

MOSCOW (Reuters/AFP) – Several airlines have announced the suspension of flights to Russian cities, after experts suggested the crash of the Azerbaijan Airlines this week may have been caused by a Russian anti-aircraft missile.

Moscow has declined to comment on reports the plane could have been accidentally shot down by its air defense.

Russia has said that Grozny, the Chechen capital where the plane was meant to land, was being attacked by Ukrainian drones that day.

It crashed near the Kazakh city of Aktau Wednesday, killing 38 of the 67 people on board.

Turkmenistan Airlines – the national carrier of the reclusive Central Asian state – was the latest airline to announce cancellations Saturday.

It said that "regular flights between Ashgabat-Moscow-Ashgabat were canceled from 30/12/2024 to 31/01/2025," without giving an explanation.

The decision came after UAE airline flydubai suspended the flights between Dubai and the southern Russian cities of Mineralnye Vody and Sochi that were scheduled between December 27 and January 3.

Kazakhstan's Qazaq Air has suspended its flights to Russia's Urals city of Yekaterinburg until the end



People commemorate victims of an Azerbaijan Airlines' passenger plane crash at a memorial installed outside an airport in Baku, Azerbaijan on Dec. 26, 2024.

of January. The Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 crashed near the western Kazakh city of Aktau, on the shores of the Caspian Sea.

It was carrying out a flight between Azerbaijan's capital Baku and the city of Grozny in Russia.

For several days, some Western experts have been pointing to a crash caused by a Russian anti-aircraft missile.

Citing preliminary results of an investigation, Azerbaijan's transport minister said Friday that the crash suffered physical "external interference."

Statements from Azerbaijan citing the investigation into the incident suggest Baku believes the plane was hit mid-air.

Russia's Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologized to Azerbaijan's president for a "tragic incident" which happened in Russian airspace.

"(President) Vladimir Putin apologized for the tragic incident that occurred in Russian airspace and once again expressed his deep and sincere condolences to the families of the victims and wished a speedy recovery to the injured," the Kremlin said in a statement.

Prisons in Crisis

Figures: 74 Attacks Take Place Every Day Behind Bars in UK

LONDON (The Independent) – Seventy-four assaults take place every day in jails across England and Wales, new figures laying bare the lack of order in the prison estate showed.

With prisons stretched to maximum capacity and staff struggling to cope, there were 26,912 assault incidents in English and Welsh prisons in 2023.

Of these, 3,205 were deemed to be serious assaults, an average of eight every day, the figures showed.

Almost 10,000 of the assaults were inflicted on staff, with 825 of these being classed as serious. The figures, revealed in House of Commons Library research, showed a significant increase in assaults compared with previous years.

In 2022, there were 21,015 total assaults, meaning there was a 28 percent jump year on year. The research, commissioned by the

Liberal Democrats, also revealed the country's most violent prisons.

The beleaguered HMP Wandsworth, where former soldier Daniel Khalife escaped from last year, and where former prison officer Linda De Sousa Abreu was filmed staging a sexual assault on an inmate, saw by far the most assaults of any prison, recording 1,044 total assaults. More than half of these, 571, were on staff.

HMP Berwyn in Wales has the next highest assaults with 783 and then Thameside with 667.

The Independent has repeatedly highlighted the crisis facing prisons due to the combination of staff shortages and overcrowding.

Earlier this year, this paper reported that the number of prison officers trained to deal with riots as part of so-called Tornado squads has plummeted by a third, with experts warning the decline would

lead to more violence and disorder in prisons.

The Independent also revealed an exodus of the most experienced prison officers, leading to fears jails were vulnerable to increased violence and even being overrun by gangs.

Since coming to power, Labour has released thousands of inmates early in a bid to free up space and restore order to the prison estate.

Prisons Minister James Timpson said Britain faced the "total breakdown of law and order" without the scheme, with the system "teetering on the edge of disaster" after being "run at 99 percent capacity for months".

The Liberal Democrats used the fresh research to repeat calls for an urgent plan to recruit and retain more prison officers, and tackle the criminal courts backlog to reduce the number of people on remand.

Homelessness Surges to Record Levels in U.S.



Staff for the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust in Florida tally the number of people living unsheltered in downtown Miami, late on Jan. 26, 2024.

SACRAMENTO (Xinhua) – The United States experienced its highest level of homelessness in 2024, with several states reporting triple-digit percentage increases as the nationwide housing crisis deepened, according to federal data released Friday.

The annual report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revealed that 771,480 people were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2024, marking an 18.1 percent increase from 2023.

The most dramatic increases occurred in Illinois, Hawaii, and other states struggling with housing affordability challenges and surges in migrant arrivals.

HUD data showed Illinois recorded the nation's steepest rise, with a 116.2 percent increase that brought its homeless population to 25,832. The Chicago region accounted for 91 percent of the surge, primarily due to an influx of migrants. According to the report, new arrivals, including migrant and asylum-seeking families, made up more than 13,600 people in emergency shelters in Chicago.

Hawaii experienced the second-largest percentage increase, with an 87 percent rise pushing its homeless population to 11,637. The Maui wildfires last year played a significant role, with over 5,200 people staying in disaster emergency shelters during the count.

Massachusetts reported the third-highest increase at 53.4 percent, followed closely by New York at 53.1 percent. HUD noted that New York City's surge was primarily driven by asylum seekers, who accounted for almost 88 percent of the increase in sheltered homelessness in the city.

"No American should face homelessness," said HUD Secretary Adrienne Todman in the report. While acknowledging that the data was

nearly a year old, she emphasized the importance of focusing on evidence-based efforts to prevent and end homelessness.

Colorado rounded out the top five with a 29.6 percent rise in homelessness. The state reported 18,715 people experiencing homelessness, with family homelessness more than doubling due to a 134 percent surge.

California alone accounted for nearly a quarter of the nation's homeless population, with 187,084 people experiencing homelessness -- roughly 48 per 10,000 residents, according to HUD.

Despite much effort and spending to increase housing for people without homes, Los Angeles has achieved only a 5 percent reduction in unsheltered homelessness since 2023.

The crisis has disproportionately affected different populations across states. Family homelessness saw the most significant single-year increase nationwide at 39 percent. Nearly 150,000 children experienced homelessness on a single night in 2024, a 33 percent jump from the previous year.

In Colorado, family homelessness more than doubled, while California reported 25,639 individuals in families experiencing homelessness.

People identifying as Black, African American, or African remain disproportionately affected, accounting for 32 percent of those experiencing homelessness despite comprising only 12 percent of the U.S. population.

The surge in homelessness came amid a continuing affordable housing crisis. Communities reported that increases in the sheltered population reflected expanded shelter capacity, the end of eviction moratoriums and other pandemic-era protections, a shortage of affordable housing, and rising numbers of immigrants arriving in the United States.

Afghan Forces Target 'Several Points' in Pakistan, Escalate Tensions

KABUL (Reuters) – Afghan Taliban forces targeted "several points" in neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan's defense ministry said on Saturday, days after Pakistani aircraft carried out aerial bombardment inside Afghanistan.

The statement from the Defense Ministry did not specify Pakistan but said the strikes were conducted "beyond the 'hypothetical line'" – an expression used by Afghan authorities to refer to a border with Pakistan that they have long disputed.

"Several points beyond the hypothetical line, serving as centers and hideouts for malicious elements and their supporters who organized and coordinated attacks in Afghanistan, were targeted in retaliation from the southeastern direction of the country," the ministry said.

Asked whether the statement referred to Pakistan, ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khowarazmi said: "We do not consider it to be the territory of Pakistan, therefore, we cannot confirm the territory, but it was

on the other side of the hypothetical line."

Afghanistan has for decades rejected the border, known as the Durand Line, drawn by British colonial authorities in the 19th century through the mountainous and often lawless tribal belt between what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan.

No details of casualties or specific areas targeted were provided. The Pakistani military's public relations wing and a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Wednesday authorities warned on Afghan days they would retaliate after the Pakistani bombardment, which they said had killed civilians. Islamabad said it had targeted hideouts of militants along the border.

The neighbors have a strained relationship, with Pakistan saying that several militant attacks that have occurred in its country have been launched from Afghan soil – a charge the Afghan Taliban denies.

News in Brief

KYIV (Dispatches) – Ukraine's stockpiles of U.S.-supplied long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) are running low, The New York Times (NYT) reported, citing senior American officials. ATACMS are long-range ballistic missiles that can fly up to 300 kilometers (about 186 miles). The U.S. eased restrictions on Ukraine's use of ATACMS in November 2024, allowing Kyiv to launch them against targets in Russia. Ukraine is now limiting these attacks due to a dwindling supply of the weapons and potential changes in U.S. policy, the newspaper reported. Two senior U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told the daily that when U.S. President Joe Biden gave Kyiv the green light to launch ATACMS into Russian territory, Ukraine likely had only about 50 of the missiles left in its arsenal. Following Biden's change in policy – which was accompanied by permission from the UK to attack Russia with British long-range Storm Shadows – Ukraine launched a series of missile strikes against Russian airfields, military facilities, and weapons factories.

NEW DELHI (AFP) – India on Saturday accorded former premier Manmohan Singh, one of the architects of the country's economic liberalization in the early 1990s, a state funeral with full military honors, complete with a gun salute. Singh, who held office from 2004 to 2014, died at the age of 92 on Thursday, after which seven days of state mourning were declared. The honors were led by President Draupadi Murmu with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in attendance, along with the country's top civilian and military officials. Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck also attended the ceremony. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, who called the former prime minister his mentor and guide, joined Singh's family as they prayed before his cremation. Earlier, mourners gathered to pay their respects to Singh. His coffin, draped in garlands of flowers, was flanked by a guard of honor and carried to his Congress Party headquarters in New Delhi.

KHARTOUM (Xinhua) – At least 20 civilians were killed and 17 others injured in two attacks by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on two displacement camps in El Fasher city in western Sudan, a local government official said on Saturday. "Last night (Friday), a RSF militia drone dropped four bombs on Qoz Bena school, a camp hosting hundreds of displaced people in El Fasher, killing 19 civilians and injuring 16 others," Ibrahim Khatir, director-general of North Darfur State's health department, told Xinhua. "This morning, the militia launched artillery shelling on Abu Shouk displacement camp, north of El Fasher, killing a civilian and injuring a girl," he added. The RSF has not yet commented on the two incidents in El Fasher. Fierce clashes have been raging in El Fasher, the capital city of North Darfur State, between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF since May 10. Sudan has been gripped by a devastating conflict between the SAF and the RSF since mid-April 2023, which claimed at least 29,683 lives and displaced over 14 million people, either inside or outside Sudan, according to the latest estimates by international organizations.

ISLAMABAD (Xinhua) – At least 383 security personnel and 925 terrorists were killed in 59,775 operations conducted across Pakistan in 2024, a senior officer of the Pakistan army says. During the operations, 73 high-value targets from the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and other militant groups were killed, Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, director general of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), told a press briefing. "This year marks the highest number of terrorists neutralized in the past five years," he said. More than 179 operations have been conducted on a daily basis by the Pakistan army, law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and the police during the year, the ISPR chief said. The Pakistani army has made significant strides in counter-terrorism efforts and border security management, Chaudhry added. The Pakistani military has expanded its operations to combat smuggling, drug trafficking, electricity theft, and hoarding, he noted.

OTTAWA (AP) – The Canadian Parliament's Public Accounts Committee will hold a meeting on January 7 to consider a motion of no-confidence in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government, the Panel's Chair, John Williamson, a Conservative, announced. "It is now clear that the Liberal government does not have the confidence of parliament," Williamson said in a copy of the letter he posted on X. The committee comprises five Liberal MPs, four Conservative lawmakers, and one each from the NDP and the Bloc Quebecois. The result of the vote is due to be introduced to the House of Commons on January 27, when the parliament returns from its six-week winter break, while a motion of no-confidence could be held as early as January 30, according to Williamson. Conservatives have already floated two consecutive no-confidence votes in the government, which, however, managed to survive thanks to support from their coalition partner – the NDP. The votes came as more than 50 Liberal MPs reportedly reached a consensus that Trudeau needs to step down as party leader. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's resignation in mid-December further added to pressure on Trudeau to step down amid his government's free fall in opinion polls.

JAKARTA (AFP) – France has sent Indonesia an official request for the transfer of a French death row inmate who has spent nearly 20 years in prison, an Indonesian minister told AFP on Saturday. Indonesia has in recent weeks released half a dozen high-profile detainees, including a Filipino mum on death row and the last five members of the so-called "Bali Nine" drug ring. French diplomats have acknowledged that talks were underway for the transfer of Serge Atlaoui, a 61-year-old Frenchman arrested in 2005 at a drugs factory outside the capital Jakarta. The Indonesian government has now confirmed it received the official transfer request, which will be discussed in early January. "We have received a formal letter requesting the transfer of Serge Atlaoui," senior law and human rights minister Jusril Itha Mahendra told AFP. The French embassy in Jakarta declined AFP's request for comment.