



## Bi-Weekly Press Briefing 03 December 2021

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### Story

#### Situation in Afghanistan

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said there was a heart-breaking and desperate situation in Afghanistan, and the humanitarian crisis was not going away, it was increasing and multiplying in its scale. UNHCR was appealing for much more support amid acute and rising humanitarian needs for 3.5 million people displaced by conflict inside Afghanistan. A lack of insulated shelters, warm clothes, insufficient fuel for heating, and inadequate amounts of food and medical supplies were just some of the deprivations that the forcibly displaced are facing in Afghanistan, as temperatures began to plunge below freezing.

After more than 40 years of conflict, Afghanistan remains one of the most complex humanitarian situations in the world, with people on the move across the country following a series of climate-change related emergencies and natural disasters. Temperatures are expected to drop to -25°C, and many displaced families lack proper shelter. The humanitarian crisis is escalating daily. Hunger in the country has reached truly unprecedented levels. Nearly 23 million people, namely 55 per cent of the population, are facing extreme levels of hunger, and nearly 9 million of them are at risk of famine. Supplying food to help avoid widespread starvation is an immediate priority.

This year, UNHCR had assisted some 700,000 displaced people across the country, the majority since mid-August. Currently UNHCR was able to reach nearly 60,000 people every week. Further resources were

urgently needed for the most vulnerable. UNHCR support will continue throughout the cold season until February 2022 to help forcibly displaced families cope with the extreme conditions. UNHCR has launched a [global fundraising winter campaign](#) to help ease the burden for forcibly displaced families amid the most life-threatening months of the year, in Afghanistan and other countries across the world.

Responding to questions, Mr. Baloch said UNHCR was originally asking for more than 600 million USD to help through the end of the year. At that point the humanitarian organizations were helping 18 million Afghans, but they now needed to help 24 million, and it was a race against time. This was a crisis of hunger and starvation. The situation was not normal, and the host communities, who were not displaced but hosting the displaced, needed support as well. Winter is harsh in Afghanistan. Everything is needed, including medicines. Children are mal-nourished and ending up in hospital. One million children are at risk of dying if they are not given support. The economy is crumbling and collapsing, services are collapsing, and there needs to be a massive international mechanism to support all Afghans. The sense of desperation is on the rise in the country, and there are millions more who need the support of the international community.

On the overall security situation in Afghanistan, Mr. Baloch said the situation was still very uncertain. The de facto Taliban authorities are in control, but recently there had been an uptick of attacks on them from different locations, including hospitals and places of worship. The situation was calmer, but still insecurity was a big challenge. Humanitarians had to be aware of the ground realities now to be able to reach more people. There is currently no large-scale fighting, but people are displaced and are moving. Some of the displaced are returning home- at least 370,000 have tried to return to their places of origin, but the challenges are linked to what they found when they got there and whether they still had homes. Many were scrambling to access food. The displacement picture was in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

Responding to a question on the relationship with the Taliban and whether they were aiding or proving to be an obstacle to reaching people in need, Mr. Baloch said the de facto administration on the ground did extend their help as much as they could in terms of reaching people and bringing in supplies, but it was very clear that they had their own challenges in running an administration. This was not a group that had experience or resources in running an administration, and they looked towards humanitarians to clarify their role. Humanitarian aid, however, is not a solution for a crumbling and collapsing economy: for that there needs to be more international engagement to avoid a larger catastrophe happening. Winter is there, and snow will start to fall, cutting off more areas. It is a race against time to reach everyone as soon as possible. It is a crisis in particular for mothers and children, and there is a need for a specialized feeding mechanism for children. This is why Afghanistan's crisis is so vital.

### **Situation in Nigeria**

Boris Cheshirkov, for UNHCR, said the situation in Nigeria, where killings, kidnappings and looting had forced 11,500 Nigerians to flee to Niger, was very alarming. UNHCR was alarmed by the repeated attacks. The violence comes against the backdrop of inter-communal clashes between farmers and herders, aggravated by the climate crisis. Women and children make up the majority of recent arrivals across the border and describe killings, kidnappings for ransom, and the destruction of villages. UNHCR is providing emergency assistance and identifying the most vulnerable, but needs are rising rapidly. Niger is to be commended as an example of solidarity and reciprocity in an unstable region, despite economic hardship, social challenges, and the continuing effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. UNHCR's operation is 64% funded; continuing and increasing support is needed.

Responding to questions, Mr. Cheshirkov said there were different drivers of the situation, including unresolved conflicts, tensions between farmers and herders, and the armed groups had criminal motives. Arriving refugees were telling UNHCR staff that they called the armed groups "bandits". It was up to the authorities to provide security, identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. UNHCR was trying to bring assistance to those who had been attacked and internally displaced, but was concerned that the frequency of attacks had increased, and more people were fleeing across the border to Niger. The question of the security situation was for the authorities, but UNHCR had been able to establish a presence in Sokoto

State, and had been successful in delivering some humanitarian assistance, but this was insufficient, and needs continued to increase. Efforts were also focused on the other side of the border in Niger to reach the most recently displaced, who were telling horrific tales upon their arrival.

### **Asylum seekers in northern Mexico**

Responding to questions on Mexico and the USA and access to the USA by asylum-seekers who were having to stay in the North of Mexico, in cities controlled by cartels where the insecurity was chronic, Mr. Cheshirkov said UNHCR had from the start expressed serious concerns about the migrant protection protocols and its impact on asylum-seekers as they were trying to reach security and their access to due process rights. The announced changes to policy were not sufficient to address these fundamental concerns. UNHCR had never been involved in implementing the migrant protection protocols and would not be supporting the reinstated policy.

### **Situation in Ethiopia**

Responding to a question on the situation in Ethiopia, Mr. Cheshirkov said that UNHCR remained deeply concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in northern Ethiopia. The conflict was now more than one year in, and the overall security situation was very complex and fluid. UNHCR was planning and preparing for potential refugee movements, in consultation with partners. The regional contingency plan was being revised, and UNHCR operations in neighbouring countries were on the alert to provide aid should the situation evolve.

### **WHO 2021 Report on Global Trans Fat Elimination**

Francesco Branca, Director of Nutrition and Food Safety at the World Health Organization (WHO), on eliminating industrial trans-fats from the food supply in the context of the launch on 7 December of the 2021 Report on Global Trans Fat Elimination, said some fats were unhealthy, in particular trans fats. The majority of these were produced industrially and could be eliminated and replaced by healthy oils, which would save 500,000 deaths globally from cardiovascular disease every year. WHO had set a target of total elimination of trans fats from the food chain by 2033, and was very close to this. On 7 December the third countdown Report would be issued, elaborating on the progress that had been achieved. If adequate policies were in place, the food system could be changed, and people shifted to a healthier diet.

On a question on what kinds of replacements were possible, Mr. Branca said that industrial trans fats should be replaced by unsaturated fats, each one of which had a different application. WHO was trying to ensure that there was no shift towards other oils that had a negative effect, such as palm oil, which had a high saturated fat component. Progress was being made all over the world, but it was not only up to manufacturers themselves; ingredient manufacturers also needed to be involved in the discussion. Most countries were applying themselves to the way forward. More poor countries were becoming involved: the problems were actually countries in transition, where they were using more oils in production. On a question related to palm oil, the commitment was on the elimination of trans fats and trying to keep saturated fats to lower levels, Mr. Branca said. It was possible to use different raw ingredients to produce oils that were higher in unsaturated fats. It was a question of having adequate investment in industries in order to curb the use of palm oil.

### **Covid-19 and Omicron variant**

Responding to questions about the situation of children infected by Covid-19 in Switzerland and the closure of schools due to the infection of non-vaccinated children, Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said there were reports from all over the world of such situations. Even if children mostly had a mild infection, they could pass on the virus to parents or grandparents, who would be at greater risk. However, some children had died of the disease, and this should not be forgotten. There were different ages at which the different vaccinations could be administered. The likelihood of a vaccinated parent being

infected was slimmer than a non-vaccinated parent, and even if they were infected, the strength of the disease was less. Vaccination remained important and one of the biggest weapons against the outbreak. There was a need for a solid risk assessment to respond accordingly. Testing was vital in this regard. Masks were very good in preventing infection and preventing spreading infection to others.

On a question on Omicron and the severity and transmissibility of the variant, Mr. Lindmeier said all observations, assessments and tests on Omicron needed to be brought together and considered by experts, and this would take some time. Joined-up information was not yet available, and it would take some time. Preliminary data showed there was higher transmissibility, but this was all that was available so far, and was only an observation of a particular area. The predominant variant of Covid-19 right now remained the Delta variant, and the population had to be protected against Delta. The current protection measures also worked against Omicron. The travel restrictions, economic closures, lockdowns in some areas that occurred over the previous weeks were due to a rise in Delta cases, and this should not be forgotten.

On vaccinations and testing, Mr. Lindmeier said testing was important to get a clearer picture, and countries in Europe had increased testing at airports to verify if passengers on planes were infected with Covid-19 and the Omicron variant. This was highly recommended, and was very much preferred to applying strict travel restrictions, depending on the situation and the risk assessment. Exit- and entry-testing, transit testing, testing in schools and at hotspots were all important. Vaccination was another tool in the bucket, and all tools should be used to combat the disease. Masks, hand hygiene, and room ventilation all needed to be used in a smart way following a risk assessment of the situation of the region and area. On whether there were any deaths linked specifically to the Omicron variant, there were no reports of this yet, but all the evidence was being collected. As much information as possible needed to be collected to make a risk assessment, without being confused by individual information.

Responding to a question specifically on schools in Switzerland, Mr Lindmeier said the school districts and Health and Education Ministries had to make the risk assessment and take the appropriate decisions, weighing the risk on taking children out of the school system with the risk of infection, and this had to be done on the ground.

### **Geneva Announcements**

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of the Press and External Relations Section at the [United Nations Information Service](#), said that today was the [International Day of Persons with Disabilities](#), and the United Nations Secretary-General had issued a statement, in which he said that realizing the rights, agency, and leadership of persons with disabilities would advance our common future. COVID-19 has laid bare the persistent barriers and inequalities faced by the world's 1 billion persons with disabilities, who have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic. A disability-inclusive pandemic response and recovery should be guided by persons with disabilities themselves, forge partnerships, tackle injustice and discrimination, expand access to technology and strengthen institutions to create a more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable post-COVID-19 world.

Mr. LeBlanc also announced that UNCTAD would hold a hybrid press conference next week on Wednesday 8 December at 12 noon on the publication of the Economic Development in Africa Report 2021. Speakers during the embargoed press conference would include Rebeca Grynspan, UNCTAD Secretary-General, Paul Akiwumi, UNCTAD, Director, Division for Africa, LDCS and Special Programmes, and Wamkele Mene, Secretary-General of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat.

Responding to a question on whether the UN building in Geneva would be made more disability-friendly, Mr. LeBlanc said that an important purpose of the Strategic Heritage Plan and the ongoing renovation works was to improve accessibility and mobility in the Palais des Nations, and a number of features were being added to ensure that people with mobility issues could access the premises more easily.

The [Committee against Torture](#) (Palais des Nations, Room XXIII) was closing its 72nd session at 10 a.m. this morning. It would issue its concluding observations on the six countries reviewed during the session:

Sweden, Kirghizstan, Nigeria, Lithuania, Serbia and Bolivia.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Palais Wilson) would close this afternoon (at 3 p.m.) its 105th session and issue its concluding observations on the five countries reviewed during the session: Switzerland, Singapore, Thailand, Denmark and Chile.