



UNOG Bi-Weekly Press Briefing 14 January 2022

14-01-2022 | Press Conferences

Story

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the [hybrid briefing](#), which was attended by spokespersons and representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Health Organization, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, the World Food Programme and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Largest-ever allocation from UN emergency fund to thirteen under-funded humanitarian crises

Jens Laerke, for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths had made the largest-ever allocation of US\$150 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to boost underfunded humanitarian operations in 13 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East. These allocations were made twice a year to countries' humanitarian appeals selected because of their low level of funding, severity of humanitarian needs, and vulnerability.

The top recipients were the humanitarian operations in Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan, which would receive between \$20 million and \$25 million each. Other recipient countries – Myanmar, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Haiti, Lebanon, Madagascar, Kenya, Angola, and Honduras – would receive between \$5 and \$12 million each. The CERF funding would help the prioritization of life-saving projects to respond to – for example – food security, nutrition, health, and protection needs.

Overall, humanitarian needs were growing across the world. As had been presented in the Global Humanitarian Overview in December, at least 274 million people would need humanitarian assistance in 2022. The United Nations and its partners aimed to assist the most vulnerable people at a cost of \$41 billion.

Answering questions, Mr. Laerke remarked that there was a continuous underfunding problem – for instance, last year’s appeals had been less than 50% funded. The Emergency Plan 2021 for Lebanon had required USD 168 million – USD 23.5 million had been funded, a funding coverage of only 14%, Mr. Laerke also explained.

Also answering to questions, Mr. Laerke said that in Syria, the money would be given to projects selected by the humanitarian country team and coordinator, where there could plug critical gaps. Regarding Afghan, some States had made generous announcements on allocations coming up. Afghanistan’s was the world’s largest humanitarian appeal: the country needs almost 4.5 billion dollars in 2022. There would be a pledging conference for this appeal in mid-March. USD 8 million from the present allocation were going to Lebanon, where specific projects had not yet been identified, however. Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso would receive USD 10 million each.

All countries had to submit their strategies by end of January, with monies to be released to individual projects by mid-February.

New treatments for COVID-19

Fadela Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), introduced Dr Janet Diaz, Team Lead Clinical Care at WHO, who then presented the latest WHO “living guidelines” on therapeutics and COVID-19 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-therapeutics-2022.1>). These updated guidelines had been informed by trials conducted by researchers and academics.

The new guidelines made several [recommendations](#), among them a “strong recommendation” for the use of baricitinib in patients with severe or critical COVID-19: this drug was meant to be given on top of corticosteroids (which in turn had been the object of a previous recommendation by WHO). A further “conditional recommendation” was related to the use of sotrovimab – a monoclonal antibody – for patients with non-severe COVID-19.

The WHO Therapeutics and COVID-19 [website](#) also provided a timeline of other, newer drugs that were coming out. An update was scheduled at the beginning of February concerning nirmatrelvir and fluxovamine.

Answering questions, Dr Diaz explained that WHO was continuously updating its guidelines based upon the evidence as it emerged. Also, as soon as new trials came to the public space, WHO would put them through a very standardized process to update the living guidelines.

With the evolution of the virus and in the context of its Omicron variant, there was concern that monoclonal antibodies could see their ability to neutralize the virus reduced, Dr Diaz explained, answering other questions. Regarding sotrovimab (the monoclonal antibody that was now recommended), there was evidence from laboratory studies showing that it retained its activity; more studies were being done in vitro and in vivo.

WHO had previously published strong recommendations against the use of hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin as these drugs had not shown efficacy against COVID-19, Dr Diaz also said. Regarding the efficacy of preventive products, such as antiviral nasal sprays, Dr Diaz said WHO did not yet have sufficient evidence upon which to make recommendations.

WHO was committed to affordable and equitable access to therapies and life-saving drugs; it was meeting with manufacturers and negotiating fair prices, with ACT-A partners, Dr Diaz stressed.

Finally, Ms. Chaib said that a statement of the Emergency Committee on COVID-19 was expected to be sent to journalists on Monday morning, 17 January.

Situation in Ethiopia

Elizabeth Throssel, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the Office was alarmed by disturbing reports of civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects resulting from airstrikes in Ethiopia's Tigray region. At least 108 civilians had reportedly been killed and 75 injured since the year began, as a result of air strikes allegedly carried out by the Ethiopian air force.

On Wednesday this week, an airstrike had claimed the life of a 72-year-old man. On 11 January, the state-owned Technical Vocational Education and Training institute had been hit, reportedly killing three men and leaving 21 people injured – most of them women. On 10 January, 17 civilians were reportedly killed and 21 injured – most of them women again – after an airstrike reportedly carried out by a drone. The deadliest airstrike, hitting the Dedebit Internally Displaced Persons' camp on 7 January, had left 59 people dead. Other airstrikes had been reported last week, hitting a private minibus traveling from Adiet to Axum city, Shire airport, Mai-Aini refugee camp and other areas.

The OHCHR called on the Ethiopian authorities and their allies to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects, in line with their obligations under international law. Any attack, including airstrikes, should fully respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack. Parties to the conflict must take all feasible measure to verify that targets were indeed military objectives and suspend an attack if it became apparent that the target was not a military objective. Failure to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality could amount to war crimes.

OHCHR was also concerned by the continuing arbitrary arrests and detention amid the state of emergency. While welcoming the recent release of several high-profile individuals, OHCHR remained concerned that hundreds of persons remained indefinitely detained in appalling conditions and without being brought before a court of law, among other violations of procedural guarantees.

Taking questions, Ms. Throssel said that this year so far, at least 108 civilians had been killed by air strikes in the Tigray region. It was important for the conflict to stop and for all sides to start talking, not least because of the dramatic warning of the World Food Programme that people were not getting food due to the fighting and “were essentially starving.”

Indeed, Tomson Phiri for the World Food Programme (WFP), warned that the Programme's life-saving food assistance operations in northern Ethiopia were about to grind to a halt because intense fighting blocking the passage of fuel and food. The escalation of conflict across northern Ethiopia meant that no WFP convoy had reached Mekelle since mid-December.

Stocks of nutritionally fortified food for the treatment of malnourished children and women were now exhausted, and the last of WFP's cereals, pulses and oil would be distributed this week. Warehouses were completely empty, which had almost never happened. The lack of both food and fuel meant WFP had been able to reach only 20% of persons in need; WFP estimated that on average only 29% of the caloric needs of crisis-affected populations had been covered in the past months.

After 14 months of conflict in northern Ethiopia, more people than ever needed urgent food assistance. At the same time, food distributions were at an all-time low due to active conflict, access constraints and lack of financial resources. “With no food, no fuel, no access, we are on the edge of a major humanitarian disaster,” Mr. Phiri warned. WFP had 4,000 metric tons of food left, only enough to assist 10 percent of the 2.1 million people WFP needed to reach in Tigray. The available fuel would only take WFP for the next 10 days.

WFP planned to reach 2.1 million people with food assistance in Tigray; 650,000 in Amhara; and 534,000 in Afar Region. The agency was calling for an additional USD 337 million to deliver its emergency food

assistance response in Northern Ethiopia and USD 170 million to reach those affected by severe drought in the Somali region over the next six months.

Mr. Phiri reiterated WFP's call on all parties to respect the security of humanitarian workers. This was a bitter conflict, he noted, that directly targeted humanitarian assets.

Hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Serbia

Elizabeth Throssel, for the OHCHR, said the Office was deeply concerned by recent incidents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Serbia, that saw individuals glorify atrocity crimes and convicted war criminals, target certain communities with hate speech, and, in some cases, directly incite violence. The incidents had taken place in several locations in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including Bijeljina, Prijedor, For, Gacko, Visegrad, as well as in the Brčko District, and in Priboj and Novi Pazar in Serbia.

These acts, which had happened amid religious holidays last weekend, included large groups of people chanting the name of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić during torchlight processions or singing nationalistic songs calling for the takeover of various locations in the former Yugoslavia. Individuals fired shots into the air as they drove past a mosque.

The fear, and the risk, was that such acts – fueled by the continued inflammatory, nationalistic rhetoric and hate speech of some politicians – would continue increasing in 2022 – a year that was due to see elections in Serbia in April and in October in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the political environment was already extremely tense.

These incidents, some in locations that saw large-scale atrocity crimes during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were an affront to survivors, including those who had returned to their homes after the conflict. The failure to prevent and sanction such acts, which fueled a climate of extreme anxiety, fear and insecurity in some communities, was a major obstacle to trust-building and reconciliation.

States parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – among them Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – were obliged to ensure that incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence was prohibited in law and practice.

Answering questions, Ms. Throssel said that the crucial topic was to encourage leaders and communities to refrain from hate speech and build trust and reconciliation. With incidents having increased in the recent months, it was necessary to tackle hate speech. In this regard, it was important to put oneself in the shoes of communities that were living in a climate of fear and insecurity, amid the glorification of war criminals and all manner of abuses. There also had been a range of incidents targeting Muslim minorities. It was important to encourage political leaders to condemn those incidents, as some had done.

Koblenz trial against crimes in Syria

Ms. Vellucci quoted a press release by the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic, in which the IIIM welcomed “the landmark judgement against Anwar R, at the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany. The former high-ranking Syrian official was found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in torture, murder and sexual violence in his previous position as Head of the Investigation Department of Branch 251 of the Syrian intelligence services.”

In the same press release, Catherine Marchi-Uhel, Head of the IIIM, stated that “the Koblenz ruling is highly significant not only for the direct victims and survivors these crimes, but also for the victims and survivors of the many unaddressed past and on-going violations in Syria. This verdict reminds us all of what is possible and should leave perpetrators of serious crimes in no doubt that there will be accountability for their

actions.”

A decade of conflict in Sahel leaves 2.5 million people displaced

Boris Cheshirkov, for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR was calling for concerted international action to end the armed conflict in Africa’s Central Sahel region, which had forced more than 2.5 million people to flee their homes in the last decade. Internal displacement had increased tenfold since 2013, from 217,000 to 2.1 million by late 2021. The number of refugees in the Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, now stood at 410,000.

Armed groups reportedly carried out more than 800 deadly attacks last year, uprooting some 450,000 people within their countries and forcing a further 36,000 to flee into a neighbouring country. In Burkina Faso, the total number of IDPs had risen to more than 1.5 million by the end of 2021.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger was rapidly deteriorating amid crises. Insecurity was the main driver, made worse by extreme poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the worsening effects of the climate crisis. Women and children were often the worst affected and disproportionately exposed to extreme vulnerability and the threat of gender-based violence.

UNHCR and humanitarian partners were facing mounting challenges to access people in need and deliver the lifesaving assistance and protection that they needed. Humanitarians continued to face road attacks, ambushes, and carjacking.

UNHCR called on the international community to take bold action and spare no effort in supporting the countries of the Central Sahel to bring about the urgently needed peace, stability, and development to the region.

UNHCR was leading the efforts of UN agencies and NGOs to provide emergency shelter, manage displacement sites and deliver vital protection services. With resources dangerously overstretched, UNHCR was urging more support to help save lives and address vulnerabilities. In 2021, more than a third of UNHCR’s Central Sahel funding needs were unmet. To mount an effective response in 2022 UNHCR required USD 307 million.

In answers to journalists’ queries, Mr. Cheshirkov explained that the refugee agency was calling for a unified, strategic and substantial intervention in the Sahel, to make sure that international efforts were supporting national governments and host communities in their own unwavering support to displaced persons, but were buckling under the increasing pressure. A security response was not sufficient on its own: humanitarian and development actions were also needed.

Announcements

Ms. Vellucci first announced that on Tuesday, 18 January, the Human Rights Council would hold a virtual panel discussion on “Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The goal was to highlight good practices and recommendations for gender-focused and human rights-based recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Prime Minister Mirtha Vásquez of Peru and Nada Al-Nashif, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, would address the meeting, among other experts (10-12 CET, to be watched on [UN Web TV](#)).

Ms. Vellucci also announced that the International Labour Organization (ILO) would organize a virtual embargoed press conference on Monday 17 January (10 CET), on the *World Employment and Social Outlook Trends 2022*. The report examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global labour market, including projections for 2022 and 2023. The speakers would be Guy Rider, ILO Director-General, and Richard Samans, ILO Research Department Director.

Also on Tuesday, 18 January at noon, Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, would hold a hybrid press conference on “UNRWA operational updates and presentation of 2022 budget requirements”.

Finally, Ms. Vellucci reminded the journalists that a press release had been sent yesterday to announce the launch of the *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2022*. Produced by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, together with the five Regional Commissions and the UN World Tourism Organization, this year's report examines the recovery of the global economy from the COVID-19 pandemic as new waves of infection, labour markets challenges, lingering supply-side constraints and rising inflationary pressures persist.