UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 28 January 2020

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Story

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the briefing, which was attended by the spokespersons for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The topics addressed were: trials under the antiterrorism law in Iraq; violence in Darfur; the Coronavirus; the end of cholera in Haiti; and ILO Convention 169 on indigenous peoples.

Iraq: violence under the antiterrorism law

Jeremy Laurence, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), informed that a UN report published today on the trials conducted under Iraq’s anti-terrorism laws recognized the considerable efforts taken to ensure accountability for the atrocities committed by ISIL fighters, yet raised serious concerns about unfair trials placing defendants at a serious disadvantage. The report called on judicial authorities to conduct a thorough review of trial and sentencing practices with a view to
strengthening criminal justice procedures, in line with the Constitution of Iraq and the State’s obligations under international law.

Mr. Laurence said that the report was based on independent monitoring of 794 criminal court trials of defendants mainly associated with the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) from 1 May 2018 through 31 October 2019, conducted with the full support of Iraq’s High Judicial Council.

The press release is available [here](#), while the full report can be found [here](#).

Responding to questions, Mr. Laurence said that there was limited access to lawyers, which was part of the issue. There was no response to the report from the Iraqi Government yet. The sentences that were being handed out included both jail time and death penalty. In the cases monitored by the OHCHR, the Office was aware of 109 cases in which death sentences had been imposed. According to the United Nations, the death sentence should not be applied at all.

**Violence in Darfur**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), provided an update on the clashes in the West Darfur State. He informed that the clashes in El Geneina had now forced more than 11,000 people to flee as refugees into neighbouring Chad since the previous month. Four thousands of them had fled during the previous week alone, and it was estimated that the clashes had displaced some 46,000 inside the country. Most of them had been already internally displaced people. In Chad, the refugees were currently scattered in several villages along a link that spanned nearly 100 kilometres near the border, around the town of Adré.

UNHCR, its Government counterpart and humanitarian partners were on the ground and coordinating the response to the emergency, registering refugees and providing lifesaving aid, including food, water, and relief items. Refugees needing special care, including unaccompanied children, were being identified and assisted. UNHCR continued to seek the international community’s support for the transitional government of Sudan in addressing the root causes of the conflict in Darfur. Restoring security would be key for peacebuilding.

Answering to questions from journalists, Mr. Baloch said that the clashes were of communal nature. Some efforts by the transitional Government could be seen on the ground, but international support was badly needed, as tens of thousands of desperate displaced people needed assistance.

The full press release can be read [here](#).

**Coronavirus**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that the WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, had left to China, where he had held meetings with the Ministers of Health and Foreign Affairs, as well as President Xi Jinping. A press release on Dr. Tedros’ visit would be issued later in the day, as his meetings in Beijing had just been completed. A press briefing on Dr. Tedros’ visit to take place tomorrow was to be confirmed.

Responding to a series of questions, Mr. Lindmeier could not yet confirm the exact content of Dr. Tedros’ meetings, which had just been completed. The global risk assessment of the virus was high, the regional risk was high, and the risk assessment for China was considered very high. Dr. Tedros had not travelled outside of Beijing, informed Mr. Lindmeier. He reminded that the absolute number of cases was not the only criterion for the Emergency Committee to reconvene.

On other questions, Mr. Lindmeier informed that Dr. Tedros’ delegation included Dr. Mike Ryan and Dr. Sylvie Briand. The virus incubation period could be anything between one and 14 days. It was not yet clear how heavily symptomatic one needed to be in order to transmit the virus. The virus lived on surfaces, but not
In response to further questions, Mr. Lindmeier said that there was a possibility that asymptomatic people could also be infectious; that was something that needed to be looked into, as it was currently still an unknown. Pneumonia had been initially considered one of the symptoms, but now it was no longer clear whether one could be infected and not have pneumonia. At the moment, the WHO had no definite position on whether it was recommending evacuations from the infected regions.

It was in the interest of every sovereign nation to take care of their citizens in the best way possible. Closely monitoring people and quarantining them in some situations could help limit the spread of the virus. It appeared that the Coronavirus was not a typically airborne disease, but was rather transmitted through droplets which were coughed or sneezed. Those coughing or sneezing should not do so in the open, but use a tissue and cover their nose and mouth. Normal self-protection measures were still the best possible approach, as the virus behaved like a flu. It seemed that most cases were still connected to direct contact, either within close families or health workers dealing with the infected patients.

The African continent had not yet seen any cases, said Mr. Lindmeier in a response to another question, but it was of paramount importance for countries around the world to take all necessary precautionary measures. It was a novel virus, and a lot still needed to be learned about it. The research was also still ongoing on the origin of the virus. A couple of treatments were reportedly being examined by national health authorities around the world.

Most people who had succumbed to the virus had underlying conditions. There were currently 4,428 confirmed cases in China, and associated 106 deaths. Outside of China, there were 45 confirmed cases in 13 countries. The mortality rate was still low, but an incubation period of up to 14 days ought to be borne in mind.

Mr. Lindmeier reiterated that the Coronavirus was definitely an emergency in China, but it was still not widely spreading outside of China. An international spread causing risk to other countries or demanding a coordinated international response could lead to the declaration of an international emergency. An international emergency could lead to further recommendations by the WHO.

More information on the Coronavirus can be found here.

**Haiti cholera-free**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that Haiti had been free of cholera for a year now. In order to end cholera in Haiti and receive validation from the World Health Organization for eliminating the disease, the country must maintain effective surveillance systems and remain cholera-free for two more years (three years in total).

The full statement is available here.

**Geneva announcements**

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the Universal Periodic Review was examining the situation in Turkey this morning, and in Kiribati this afternoon.

Regarding the intra-Libyan military talks, Ms. Vellucci said that the meeting was supposed to start in Geneva in the following several days, but there was no define date yet. At the same time, SG’s Special Representative Ghassan Salamé was continuing to push for a political track and bring the actors of this crises around the table.
The Conference on Disarmament was holding this morning a public plenary at the opening of which Ms. Valovaya would address the Conference as the Secretary General of the Conference. Ms. Valovaya had read the message of the Secretary-General. Summary of today’s meeting can be found here.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child would conclude this morning its review of the report of Rwanda. This afternoon, it would begin consideration of the report of the State of Palestine.

Ms. Vellucci also informed that the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) would hold a press conference in Room III on 31 January at 12 noon. UNRWA’s operational priorities and financial needs in 2020 would be presented by Christian Saunders, UNRWA Acting Commissioner-General.

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that a joint press briefing with the International Agency for the Research of Cancer ahead of the World Cancer Day would take place in Room III on Thursday, 30 January 2020 at 13:30 p.m. Two complimentary reports on cancers would be launched, which would be under embargo until 4 February.

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), informed that on 3 February, the ILO would be launching a report entitled “Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future.” The report marked the 30th anniversary since the adoption of Convention 169, the only international convention that specifically covered their rights. The report contained updated figures on the size of indigenous populations around the world. A press briefing would be held in Press Room 1 on 3 February at 10 a.m. The report would be under embargo until 3 February at 8:00 p.m.

More information on Convention 169 can be found here.

The full list of upcoming meetings and press conference at UN Geneva can be found here.