Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of the Press and External Relations Section at the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the briefing, which was attended by the spokespersons for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Refugee Agency, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Mine Action Service.

Libyan military talks

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that on 6 February, Ghassan Salamé, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, had briefed the press on the ongoing talks of the Joint Military Commission. He had noted that progress had been made on many important issues, but some points of divergence remained. Both parties were working hard to transform the truce into a permanent and lasting ceasefire. Mr. Salamé
also said political talks were scheduled to start in Geneva on 26 February 2020. More information would be communicated as it became available.

Alarming situation in northwest Syria is a “humanitarian catastrophe”

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), said that Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen had briefed the United Nations Security Council last evening on the alarming situation in Syria’s Northwest. He had noted that heavy strikes from both air and ground were causing massive waves of civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life and that “we are witnessing the humanitarian catastrophe”. An all-out military approach would not solve the problem and would come at a completely unacceptable price, Mr. Pedersen had warned. A serious international effort to cooperate on Idlib was a “humanitarian imperative,” he said.

Réal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the United Nations Secretary-General had expressed his deep concern over the events in Idlib and had strongly appealed for the cessation of hostilities and the conditions for humanitarian aid to be distributed effectively to those in need.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock had also briefed the United Nations Security Council on this situation. The previous night, OCHA had released US$20 million from the Central Emergency and Relief Fund to immediately scale up critical assistance to thousands of civilians trapped in the unfolding humanitarian disaster in northwest Syria.

The military operations in Idlib had since 1 December forced 586,000 people to flee, but the bombing and the shelling followed them and drove them into ever-smaller and ever-more congested spaces in north-west Idlib. An additional 280,000 people from urban centres in the region faced an imminent risk of displacement if the military operations continued, Mr. Laerke said.

Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet repeated her demand to all parties, including the Syrian Government, Russia, Turkey and other State or non-State actors, to ensure the protection of civilians and to carry out their military operations in accordance with international law.

Foreign powers were battling for territorial and political gains, while blatantly disregarding their obligation to protect civilians, denounced Ms. Hurtado. Civilians were killed even as they tried to escape the intensifying hostilities. On 3 February, a reported airstrike by pro-government forces had hit a bus travelling on a highway in western rural Aleppo, killing nine civilians - all from the same family – who were fleeing the latest fighting. More.

Asked if the civilians were specifically targeted by the Russian and Syrian forces or were a “collateral damage” and whether the destruction of schools and hospitals amounted to war crimes, Ms. Hurtado for the OHCHR reiterated that civilians and civilian structures were protected under international humanitarian law. Their destruction could amount to war crimes under some circumstances. Ms. Fenton for the OSE added that the striking feature of the latest hostilities was that civilians were being targeted even as they were trying to flee. Special Envoy Pedersen’s briefing to the United Nations Security Council had more information about those who were attacking the civilians, she said.
Responding to questions about the cross-border operation and the number of refugees trapped on the border, Mr. Laerke said that in January, aid had been delivered by 1,227 trucks, the highest number seen since the operation had begun in 2014. OCHA was very concerned that, given the continued fighting, the displacement had not peaked yet - there might still be massive displacement to add on what had already been labelled “humanitarian catastrophe”. Mr. Laerke underlined the extreme vulnerability of this population: already displaced from other parts of Syria, they were displaced again and pushed into an ever-smaller and very congested areas close to the Turkish border. The situation was very, very dire, Mr. Laerke said.

Several journalists asked why the delay in briefing the journalists on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The United Nations humanitarian arm was in Geneva and the more information was shared with journalists, the better the coverage would be, they said. Ms. Fenton said in response that Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Lowcock of OCHA had conveyed the concerns of the Humanitarian Task Force to the Security Council the previous night.

**Coronavirus outbreak update**

Responding to questions, Tarik Jašarevi?, for the World Health Organisation (WHO), said that WHO latest sitrep on 6 February contained information about where the cases were. In reference to the death of the 34-year-old doctor in China, Mr. Jašarevi? said that people with underlying conditions were more likely to develop more severe illness. WHO was working on disaggregating data on casualties and death, including by age.

Asked about the way China had dealt with the outbreak and the role of censorship in the global pandemic, Mr. Jašarevi? stressed that WHO was a public health agency and that its priority was to find solutions. Information was a key component in dealing with any outbreak and the population must be provided with timely and accurate information about what was known, what was not, and what should be done. He stressed the importance of appropriate risk communication that would disseminate scientific and accurate information to avoid fear and panic.

Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), emphasized that people had the right to receive accurate information from the authorities. This was what trust was built on, she stressed.

**Escalation of violence against demonstrators in Iraq**

Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), expressed alarm at the escalation in violence in the central Iraqi city of Najaf on 5 February when supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr had allegedly shot dead anti-Government demonstrators. This latest incident again raised serious concerns about the Government’s ongoing inability to fulfil its obligation under international law to protect demonstrators from attacks by so-called ‘militia’. OHCHR reiterated its call on the Government to ensure the safety of peaceful protesters at all times. Full text of the press briefing note [here](#).

**OHCHR concerned about land grabs and attacks against indigenous peoples in Nicaragua**

Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said her Office was very concerned about repeated attacks against indigenous peoples in Nicaragua, the lack of protection of their rights and the impunity for crimes committed against them.

Most of the violence has been carried out by settlers as they sought to force indigenous people from their ancestral homes and use their lands for illegal logging and cattle farming. Since 2015, some 40 indigenous people had been killed, 47 injured, 44 kidnapped and four disappeared, in cases related to land invasions. [More](#).
New human rights abuse against Parliamentarians

Rogier Huizenga, Manager of the Human Rights Programme, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), said that the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians had released new evidence of human rights violations against 509 parliamentarians from 39 countries, an increase compared with the 468 cases recorded in October 2019. Most of the cases involved governments putting pressure on members of Parliament from opposition parties.

In its latest decisions, the Committee had considered new information concerning an assassination attempt against prominent Tanzanian opposition leader Mr. Tundu Lissu in 2017, as well as a surge of new cases of violations against members of Parliament in Venezuela. At the January session, it had examined complaints from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador and the Philippines.

Fresh violence in northern Mozambique forces thousands to flee

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that UNHCR was boosting its response in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province, where a recent escalation of violence had forced thousands to flee for their lives. There had been a dramatic increase of brutal attacks by armed groups over the past months, with the recent weeks being the most volatile period since the incidents began in October 2017. Armed groups were randomly targeting local villages and terrorizing the local population. Those fleeing spoke of killings, maiming, and torture, burnt homes, destroyed crops and shops. UNHCR had reports of beheadings, kidnappings and disappearances of women and children. Read more.

Mr. Mahecic stressed, in response to questions, that UNHCR was a humanitarian and refugee agency and did not have the information nor intelligence on the groups that were spreading terror, including about their political ideology. It was impossible for UNHCR to speculate about the motives of their attacks. “It is not the job of the UNHCR to investigate but to respond to the humanitarian needs of the population,” he concluded.

UNHCR calls for decisive action to end alarming conditions on Aegean islands

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), urged Greece to intensify efforts to address alarming overcrowding and precarious conditions for asylum seekers and migrants staying on the five Greek Aegean islands of Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros. More than 36,000 asylum seekers were now staying in reception centres across five islands, originally designed for 5,400 people. Nearly 2,000 children without parents or relatives in Greece were at risk at island reception centres. Over 5,300 unaccompanied children were now in Greece and only less than a quarter were in shelters adequate for their age. More here.

In response to questions, Mr. Mahecic said there were about 112,000 refugees and migrants in Greece - 71,000 on the mainland and 41,000 on the islands. In 2019 alone, there had been nearly 60,000 new arrivals. There was a backlog of 90,000 cases in the Greek asylum system; in 56 per cent of processed cases, there was a positive decision and international protection had been granted, showing that most of this population had a valid refugee claim.

The relocation programme between the European Union and Greece had ended in 2018 and the European countries were unable to reach consensus on the issue since. UNHCR continued to advocate for the relocation of the most vulnerable, including unaccompanied children, and for solidarity with frontline states - Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Italy and Spain.

New temperature record in Antarctica

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that the Argentine research base, Esperanza, on the northern tip of the Antarctic peninsula, had set a record temperature of 18.3°C on
Thursday, beating the former record of 17.5°C on 24 March 2015. Everything seen thus far indicated a likely legitimate record, but WMO would begin a formal evaluation and verification of this maximum temperature record. Full text.

**Geneva announcements**

Christelle Loupforest, Deputy Chief, United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), announced that the 23**rd**International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers would take place from 11 to 14 February 2020 at the Palais des Nations, under the theme “Mine Action for People and Planet: Solutions, Commitments and Action”.

At 5 p.m. today, 7 February, the Committee on the Rights of the Child would close its eighty-third session and issue the concluding observations on the six countries reviewed during this session: Belarus, Costa Rica, Hungary, Rwanda, State of Palestine, and Austria.

On Monday, 10 February, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women would open its seventy-fifth session during which it would review the reports of Latvia, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova and Kiribati.

The Conference on Disarmament would hold its next public plenary at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 11 February, under the presidency of Algeria.

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