Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the briefing, which was attended by the spokespersons for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP).

The topics addressed were: situation in Idlib, Syria; displacement in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo; Afghan refugees; humanitarian situation in Madagascar; coronavirus; and a meeting of the WHO emergency committee on Ebola.

**Situation in Idlib, Syria**

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), said that the concern for millions of civilians in the Idlib area could not be overstated. It was essential that all parties immediately agree to a
cessation of hostilities. There needed to be a cooperative approach to the situation in Idlib. The Special Envoy, who had recently visited Iran, would continue high-level discussions with a broad range of actors, stressing that further massive civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life were unacceptable.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), stated that nearly 700,000 had been forcibly displaced in Idlib over the past ten weeks. That was the largest number of people displaced in such a short time period ever since the conflict had erupted in Syria. The latest displacement compounded an already dire humanitarian situation on the ground in Idleb, and protection, shelter, food, water, sanitation & hygiene, health, and emergency education were all urgent priorities. A massive humanitarian operation was underway, and in February only over 230 trucks with humanitarian aid had been sent to northwest Syria, serving 440,000 people in urgent need. A humanitarian readiness and response plan required an additional USD 336 million for the next six months to reach up to 800,000 people.

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stressed that UNHCR was deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of civilians in north-west Syria. The humanitarian crisis was becoming increasingly desperate, with massive numbers of people on the move. A critical need was shelter, compounded by the harsh winter conditions. Many schools and mosques were filled with displaced families, and even finding a place in an unfinished building had become almost impossible. Mr. Mahecic reminded that the conflict in Syria had caused the biggest displacement in the world, with 5.5 million Syrian living in the region, and more than six million displaced within the country. The full UNHCR statement can be read here.

Displacement in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that UNHCR was very concerned by the worsening situation in the eastern Beni Territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where violence had forced more than 100,000 civilians from their homes over the previous two months. Tensions in the region had been rising since the launch of a government-led military operation in December against the Allied Democratic Forces. The majority of those forced to flee in the latest wave of violence were now being sheltered by local host communities in Nobii town, which had welcomed displaced families without hesitation, but lacked resources to even meet its own needs. More than five million people remained displaced in the DRC, representing Africa’s largest internal displacement situation. UNHCR’s needs of USD 150 million to respond to the refugee and IDP crisis in the DRC in 2020 had been funded only four percent to date.

The full statement can be found here.

Fadela Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), added that the DRC was facing a very complex environment, with millions of people displaced. There were a number of serious health issues in the country, including Ebola, severely straining the health system in the country. WHO was working with national authorities and other UN agencies and humanitarian actors to meet the needs of both displaced and non-displaced populations.

Madagascar

Jean Benoit Manhes, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), informed that two weeks earlier, torrential rains in Madagascar had affected more than 120,000 people, destroying 174 schools, and forcibly displacing 16,000 people. The floods were not a story per se, but just one example of the challenges that the Madagascar population, including children, were facing in the context of multiple national disasters and disease outbreaks. The results of a recent national household survey showed that the conditions for children had not improved since the last such survey in 2012; in many cases the situation was getting worse. Forty percent of the population practices open defecation; 93 percent of drinking water in Madagascar was polluted with e.coli. Around 42 percent of children were stunted, and fewer than a third of children were fully immunized, informed Mr. Manhes. Two out of five girls got married before 18, and child labour was
prevalent. Three quarters of the population lived in extreme poverty. New epidemics could further destabilize the system. Madagascar was in a constant state of emergency due to those appalling indicators. The international community should not forget Malagasy children, who needed continuous help and attention.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), stated that Madagascar was one of the most silent and forgotten crises in the world. Altogether, there were five million people in the country living in areas prone to natural disasters. Malnutrition remained a major public health problem. Madagascar had the world’s fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition. Some 730,000 people were classified in acute food insecurity IPC3 (crisis) and IPC 4 (emergency) in the Great South of Madagascar. As of now, the WFP was assisting 230,000 out of those 730,000 severe food insecure people from nine districts in the south with emergency, early recovery and nutritional assistance activities during the lean season (December 2019 to April 2020). For the year 2020, WFP was facing a USD 42 million shortfall. More information on the WFP’s activities in Madagascar can be found here.

Responding to a question, Mr. Manhes said that only three percent of UNICEF’s 10 million appeal had been received thus far. There was a resurgence of malaria in areas where it had been absent before, partly because of the changing weather patterns.

Afghan refugees

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the United Nations Secretary-General would be in Pakistan the following week to address the long-lasting needs of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and across the world. An international conference organized by UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan would take place in Islamabad on 17-18 February to mark 40 years of Afghan refugees’ presence in Pakistan. The Secretary-General would meet high-level Pakistani officials, including the President.

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that the ministerial meeting in Islamabad the following week was to send a global reminder about the fate of millions of Afghans living as refugees, many of whom felt that the rest of the world may have already abandoned them. For more than 40 years, Afghans had continued to flee violence, war, conflict, and natural disasters. Some 4.6 million Afghans lived outside the country, with 1.4 million in Pakistan, and one million in Iran. Afghans were currently the largest group of asylum-seekers currently arriving in Europe. If Afghan nationals wanted to return, UNHCR would be ready to facilitate it, but for the time being, UNHCR was not promoting returns to Afghanistan.

The full UNHCR statement can be found here.

Coronavirus

Fadéla Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that the WHO was holding a scientific forum to look into the coronavirus epidemics, in Geneva on 11 and 12 February. Some of the 300 scientists and researchers participating were physically present in Geneva, others would join via WebEx. The meeting was using the “Research and Development Blueprint”, which had been launched following the West Africa Ebola epidemics, and which had led to results such as a vaccine for Ebola. Some sessions would be done in plenary, after which the scientists would break into working groups. The meetings would be closed to the media, but there would be a press conference at the end of the session on 12 February to provide the public with an overview of what was discussed and what the research priorities would be. Ms. Chaib added that another press conference with Dr. Tedros and Dr. Mike Ryan would take place at 4 p.m. today.

Responding to questions, Ms. Chaib said that a WHO advance team, led by Dr. Bruce Aylward, was currently on the ground in China to prepare for an international mission. The international experts would work with their Chinese counterparts on the best possible response to the epidemics. Ms. Chaib informed that WHO technical experts were checking with their Chinese counterparts on the reported new method of
registering and counting cases. Ms. Chaib reiterated that the knowledge of the coronavirus was still in early stages, and it was still not completely clear how long the incubation period lasted. The experts gathered in Geneva would discuss that aspect, among many others. As of today, there were more than 42,000 reported cases, and 1,017 deaths in China. Outside of China, there were 393 cases in 24 countries, with one recorded death (in the Philippines). The fatality rate stood at about two percent.

Several journalists raised the issue of not receiving email updates from the WHO. Others requested to be given a full list of participants in the scientific forum taking place in Geneva on 11-12 February. Ms. Chaib promised to follow up on those issues with the help of UNIS Geneva.

**Emergency Committee on Ebola**

Fadéla Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that on 12 February a meeting of the Emergency Committee on Ebola would be convened at the WHO. Every three months, under the international health regulations, the situation was being reviewed, and the previous meeting of the Committee had been held on 18 October 2019. It was not known what the experts on Ebola would decide. As of 9 February, Ms Chaib informed, there were 3,431 Ebola cases and 2,249 deaths.

One joint press conference would be held in the evening of 12 February, at which both Ebola and Coronavirus would be addressed. Several journalists suggested that two separate press conferences be organized instead of one joint conference.

**Geneva announcements**

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances was holding its 120th session at the Palais des Nations, during which it would examine more than 530 cases. A press conference would be held in Room III on 14 February at 1 p.m.

Ms. Vellucci further informed that the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) would hold a press conference on environment and mine action in Press Room 1 on 12 February at 10 a.m.