Responding to a question on today’s decision by the Swiss Government to ban gatherings with more than 1,000 people, Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service, said that the UN was assessing the situation and that the Swiss decision had just been announced. The UN Office at Geneva would follow the host country’s decision. At the moment, no large-scale gatherings, other than the Human Rights Council, which was underway, were foreseen until 15 March, said Ms. Vellucci. UN Office at Geneva would step up the actions which were already being taken, including sharing further information with delegates, visitors and staff, workplace preparations, more thorough cleaning of the Palais des Nations, etc.
 Rolando Gomez, for the Human Rights Council, said that the Swiss Government’s decision would need to be raised with the Bureau of the Council today. There were well over 1,000 participants at the Council at the moment, including all side events.

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the Swiss Government had done its assessment based on the data available to it. WHO was happy to provide its guidance and recommendations, but any government, company or other large entity was free to make its own decisions.

The outbreak was getting bigger. There would be a press conference at the WHO at 4 p.m. today.

Globally, more than 83,000 confirmed cases had been reached, with a total of 2,858 deaths. Importantly, there were also more than 30,000 people who had recovered. Some people released from health facilities might not have been fully cleared, which was why some of them were reportedly falling sick again. There were more new cases arising outside of China than in China itself. Five new countries – Nigeria, Estonia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Denmark – had reported their first cases, all connected with travel to Italy. At the moment, there were 4,351 cases in 49 countries, with 67 associated deaths. In China, ten percent of all cases were considered severe, and there had been 2,791 associated deaths.

Responding to a question, Mr. Lindmeier said that the WHO had been looking into the scenario of the virus reaching multiple countries around the world. Every country needed to take care of its care health workers first and foremost; vulnerable groups – the elderly and those with underlying conditions – needed to be looked at carefully and particularly protected; countries with weaker health systems were another area of concern. Recently, there had been only one medical lab in Africa ready to test on coronavirus; now, every African country had that possibility thanks to rapid testing systems. Countries with weaker health systems definitely needed support by the international community, stressed Mr. Lindmeier.

There were reports of people who had been tested negative a few times before eventually being tested positive. WHO would need to look into how those tests had been taken and investigate other details. In general, it would be expected that a person who had recovered from the virus would be immune to it, but a lot still had to be learned as COVID-19 was a new virus.

Responding to another question, Mr. Lindmeier said that every country, company or entity was entitled to implement their own measures, based on their respective assessments. He confirmed that a mission to Iran would start the following week; the composition and the lead of the mission were to be confirmed. WHO was asking countries to provide numbers of healthcare workers who had been infected, but countries did not always find it easy to furnish those figures. There was information that more than 3,000 care health workers from China had been infected thus far.

**Human Rights Council**

Rolando Gomez, for the Human Rights Council (HRC), said that between 60 and 80 NGOs were scheduled to be speaking today, following the oral update by the High Commissioner the previous day. One hundred and two States had spoken the previous day, in reaction to the High Commissioner’s update, and more would speak in the right to reply today. The Special Rapporteur on Torture would address the Council around 12 noon today. A report on ableism would also be presented this afternoon.

Detailed information on the Council, including programme for the following week, can be found here.

Mr. Gomez informed that a press conference by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria would take place in Press Room III on 2 March at 12 noon.
Also on 2 March, Nils Mezler, Special Rapporteur on Torture, would present his report on psychological torture in Press Room III at 2 p.m.

On 5 March at 11 a.m, Hilal Elver, Special Rapporteur on the right to food, would hold a press conference in Press Room I, informed Mr. Gomez.

**Humanitarian crisis in northwest Syria**

Alessandra Vellucci, for United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the Secretary-General was following with grave concern the escalation in northwest Syria and reports that dozens of Turkish soldiers had been killed by an airstrike. The Secretary-General reiterated his call for an immediate ceasefire and expressed particular concern about the risk to civilians from escalating military actions. Without urgent action, the risk of even greater escalation grew by the hour. The Secretary-General reiterated that there was no military solution to the Syrian conflict.

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that in a two-day operation, the WHO had sent seven truckloads or 55 tons of medicine and medical supplies from Turkey into the Idlib Governorate and part of Aleppo. As of today, out of the 84 health facilities that had been forced to suspend operations since December 2019, 31 had been able to relocate and provide services where people had sought refuge from bombardments. Due to the massive depopulation of entire areas, the caseload on functioning health facilities in Idlib was disproportionate. As of today, and since 1 December 2019, there had been 11 recorded attacks on health facilities in Syria.

Responding to a question, Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said that the UNHCR had not received any official communication regarding the movement of Syrian refugees from Turkey towards Europe. UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi had appealed to neighbouring countries, including Turkey, to broaden admissions of Syrian refugees, and to the international community to step up its support to Turkey, which was already hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), confirmed that there was still no official communication from the Turkish Government regarding the alleged change of the policy on Syrian refugees in Turkey. Meanwhile, the cross-border humanitarian operation from Turkey into Syria was continuing; some USD 100 million had been received for the ongoing humanitarian appeal for USD 500 million to help people in northwest Syria. Mr. Laerke also reiterated the UN’s call for a ceasefire and a call to all countries which exercised influence over the warring parties to respect international humanitarian law.

**Gender pay gap**

Alessandra Vellucci, for United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed about the speech of the UN Secretary-General at the New School in New York the previous day, entitled “Women and Power”.

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), said that the gender pay gap remained a critical issue in all countries of the UNECE region. Although the gap had narrowed in most UNECE countries since 2012, it remained at 16 percent on average in hourly rates, and 21 percent in monthly earnings. That meant that, on average, women worked for free from the beginning of 2020 until today. Huge differences were seen across the region; for example, the hourly rate pay gap ranged from 4 percent in Romania to 34 percent in Armenia.

The reasons were numerous and complex, ranging from the childhood influences that affected career aspirations and subject choice, through stereotyped expectations and sectorial and occupational gender segregation to the competing demands of unpaid domestic work and care duties which fell disproportionately to women. Even though illegal, discrimination might play a role in decisions about hiring,
promotion and salary.

The complex interaction of all those factors meant that neither measure of the gender pay gap—whether in hourly wages or in monthly earnings—could give a complete picture, and neither should be interpreted as indicative of explicit discrimination.

Full press release can be read here.

**Geneva announcements**

Fernando Puchol, for the World Trade Organization (WTO), informed about the event “Building a Gender-Balanced WTO for All Generations”, which would take place at the WTO on 6 March from 10 a.m., and would open with the WTO Director-General’s remarks on women’s empowerment.

The meeting of the Dispute Settlement Body had been suspended till 5 March at the latest, informed Mr. Puchol. He also said that on 3 March, the WTO Director-General would be meeting Elizabeth Truss, Secretary of State for International Trade of the United Kingdom. The WTO General Council would be meeting on 4 March at 10 a.m.

Rheal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, informed that the press stakeout by Ghassan Salamé, UN Special Envoy for Libya, would take place in Hall XIV at 4 p.m. today (The stakeout was later moved to 2:30 p.m.)

The Human Rights Committee would open on 2 March its 128th session at Palais Wilson, during which it would successively review the reports of Uzbekistan, Tunisia, Central African Republic, Portugal, and Togo.

Mr. LeBlanc also stated that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women would conclude this afternoon its 75th session and issue its concluding observations on the reports of the eight countries reviewed: Latvia, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova, and Kiribati.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was meeting in private until the end of its 67th session on 7 March, when it would issue its concluding observations on the reports of the five countries reviewed during the session: Guinea, Belgium, Ukraine, Benin, and Norway.

Mr. LeBlanc finally informed that the Conference on Disarmament would hold its next public plenary on 3 March, still under the presidency of Argentina.

* * *

The webcast for this briefing is available here: http://bit.ly/unog280220