UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update
UNICEF - OCHA - WFP

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Shotlist

2. **SOUNDBITE (EN)** Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF DR Congo Representative: “As of today, the DRC has about 100 confirmed cases, since the beginning of the epidemic, including about eight deaths.”
4. **SOUNDBITE (EN)** Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF DR Congo Representative: “Coronavirus will most likely divert the available national health capacity and resources and leave millions of children affected by measles, malaria, polio and many other killer diseases.”
6. **SOUNDBITE (EN)** Jens Laerke, spokesperson, OCHA: “Libya is at high risk of the spread of COVID-19 because of its level of insecurity, weak health systems and high numbers of migrants, refugees and internally displaced people. There are now eight confirmed cases – two of them in Tripoli, six of them in Misrata, and a total of 112 suspected cases.”
8. **SOUNDBITE (EN)** Jens Laerke, spokesperson, OCHA: “Ongoing clashes but also COVID-19 restriction measures are hampering humanitarian access and the free movement of medical and other humanitarian personnel and other humanitarian assistance across the country.”
10. **SOUNDBITE (EN) Elisabeth Byrs, spokesperson, WFP:** “WFP provides lifesaving food to 4.5 million people each month. It is now increasing its distribution cycles and hours during the day, setting up a washing station, supporting beneficiaries to practise social distancing and distribution points, and using SMS to notify families when they can collect assistance to avoid crowds.”

11. Wide shot: UN flag, palais in the background.

12. **SOUNDBITE (EN) Jens Laerke, spokesperson, OCHA:** “We are asking individual countries for exemptions to movements of essential personnel that needs to move. That is a country-level negotiation that is going on.”

From DR Congo to Libya and Syria, humanitarians adjust to COVID-19

As COVID-19 continues its advance towards vulnerable population hotspots including in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya and Syria, UN aid agencies on Tuesday insisted that they are working tirelessly to get aid to where it is needed most, while preventing the spread of infection.

And as the new coronavirus threatens global shipping and air supply chains which millions of people in crisis rely on around the world, the Organization has requested special exemptions for aid deliveries.

“We are asking individual countries for exemptions to movements of essential personnel that needs to move,” said Jens Laerke from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). “That is a country-level negotiation that is going on.”

Speaking to journalists via videoconference from Kinshasa, Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF DR Congo Representative, confirmed that eastern provinces have recorded “about 100 confirmed cases (of infection), since the beginning of the epidemic, including about eight deaths”.

Coinciding with a 20-month long Ebola outbreak – also in eastern DRC – Mr Beigbeder warned that the new coronavirus “will most likely divert the available national health capacity and resources and leave millions of children affected by measles, malaria, polio and many other killer diseases”.

According to the UN Children’s Fund, the coronavirus has exposed inherent weaknesses in the country’s health system, such as the fact that it can barely provide “even basic services such as routine immunization”.

Last year, DRC authorities were powerless to prevent the world’s worst measles epidemic which killed more than 5,300 children under the age of five, according to a new UNICEF report, On Life Support.

The country was also unable to prevent more than 30,000 cases of cholera in 2019 and more than 500 deaths – while some 16.5 million people contracted malaria last year, resulting in nearly 17,000 deaths.

Strengthening the DRC’s basic healthcare system is vital, Mr Beigbeder insisted. “Unless health facilities have the means to deliver immunization, nutrition and other essential services, including in remote areas of the country, we risk seeing the lives and futures of many Congolese children scarred or destroyed by preventable diseases.”

Some three million children in DRC have unmet vital health needs, UNICEF says, and more than nine million youngsters require humanitarian assistance.

In Libya, UN humanitarians also expressed concern about disruption to aid supply chains caused by the fast-spreading virus, and military exchanges in the suburbs of Tripoli between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (or GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by commander Khalifa Haftar, who laid siege to the capital last April.

“Libya is at high risk of the spread of COVID-19 because of its level of insecurity, weak health systems and high numbers of migrants, refugees and internally displaced people,” said OCHA spokesperson Jens Laerke. “There are now eight confirmed cases – two of them in Tripoli, six of them in Misrata, and a total of 112 suspected cases.”

To help stem the spread of the virus, OCHA has continued to deliver critical supplies, including sterile gloves and gowns, surgical masks and caps and hand disinfecting gels.
Some 100,000 information leaflets on prevention of COVID-19 measures have also been distributed to communities.

Nonetheless, “ongoing clashes - but also COVID-19 restriction measures - are hampering humanitarian access and the free movement of medical and other humanitarian personnel and other humanitarian assistance across the country,” Mr Laerke said.

In Syria, where COVID-19 has been confirmed - concerns are growing for families made vulnerable by years of conflict and multiple displacement who are often forced to live in places where social distancing is impossible.

Adapting to the challenge of preventing transmission of the virus, the World Food Programme (WFP) has altered its supply routine, including by working with partners to drive rations as close to families’ homes as possible, spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs said.

“WFP provides lifesaving food to 4.5 million people (in Syria) each month. It is now increasing its distribution cycles and hours during the day, setting up a washing station, supporting beneficiaries to practise social distancing and distribution points, and using SMS to notify families when they can collect assistance to avoid crowds.”

According to WFP, nearly eight million people are food insecure and already extremely vulnerable.

The agency said on Tuesday that the progressive COVID-19 lockdown risked pushing families further into poverty as they lose their income and face rising food prices.

“A nutritious and sufficient diet necessary to strengthen their immune system will become beyond the reach of many,” it added in a statement.