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Story

COVID-19: potential impact on the world’s poorest people

Arif Husain, Chief Economist for the World Food Programme (WFP), spoke about the new WFP analysis of the economic and food security implications of the ongoing pandemic. The study aimed to identify which countries and which groups of people would be most affected by COVID-19. Countries which heavily relied on the import of fuel and food, especially land-locked countries, were particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, countries dependent on tourism, exports of raw materials or remittances were also to be gravely affected. WFP assisted between 80 and 90 million food insecure people every year, informed Mr. Husain, and those were the people the WFP would need to continue to assist. In addition, the WFP would have to start helping those who lost their livelihoods because of the pandemic and the connected lockdowns.

Responding to a question, Mr. Husain reiterated that the WFP’s current role was twofold: continuing to help those who were already getting WFP’s assistance, mostly in poor countries; and then providing help to those most affected by the current COVID-19 pandemics. No single humanitarian agency could solve those problems on its own; governments also needed to expand their safety nets and humanitarian programs.

COVID-19: detention and prisoner releases

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that the OHCHR was encouraged to note that a number of countries had been taking action to reduce overcrowding...
in prisons, following an appeal by the High Commissioner the previous week. Iran, for example, had increased the number it is releasing, at least on a temporary basis, to around 100,000 prisoners – some 40 percent of the entire prison population. Indonesia announced it would be releasing some 30,000 prisoners convicted of minor crimes, including drug use, and Turkey was similarly considering releasing a large number of inmates.

In Syria, where the risk of mass infections in government-run prisons was extremely high, the situation in prisons and detention facilities was alarming. Even before the onset of COVID-19, there had been reports of deaths in those facilities because of torture and denial of care. Similar concerns, even if to a lesser degree, existed for those detained in facilities run by non-state armed groups. Syria was invited to release a number of detainees to the degree possible, and all parties were called on to allow access of humanitarian actors to places of detention. Those sanctions currently impeding access of medicine and other equipment to Syria should be eased, said Mr. Colville. More information is available here.

In Egypt, the OHCHR was concerned about the overcrowding of prisons, where there were more than 114,000 inmates. OHCHR was calling for the release of administrative detainees and those detained for their political work, as well as children, older people and those with serious underlying medical conditions. OHCHR was concerned about the reports that the Government was silencing critical voices on social media and journalists allegedly spreading “fake news” about COVID-19. The authorities should instead engage the population to fight the common threat together. More information is available here.

Responding to a question, Mr. Colville urged the authorities around the world not to silence the critical voices of journalists. Respectable media organizations played an absolutely essential role in informing the public during the current crisis.

**COVID-19: field hospital in Al Hol, Syria**

Ruth Hetherington, for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said that, as the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic picked up pace, the ICRC urged all not to overlook people in places of detention and refugee and displacement camps around the world. There were an estimated 100,000 people living in camps across northeast Syria, as well as tens of thousands of detainees in crowded and unhealthy conditions. The Al Hol camp was a striking example of the humanitarian challenges - around 66,000 people living there in dire conditions, the majority of them children and women. Preventative measures included fencing to avoid overcrowding, additional hand-washing points, extra protective equipment for triage staff, no relatives allowed to accompany patients and screening before entry in the event of suspected cases.

Speaking about the conflict situations around the world, Ms. Hetherington stressed that an immediate and concerted response by states and humanitarian organizations was vital. COVID-19 did not have to be catastrophic for war-torn countries with weakened healthcare systems. Plans to prevent and respond to the virus had to urgently move forward before it gained a foothold in conflict zones. ICRC’s press release on urgent action needed to counter COVID-19 threat in conflict zones can be found here.

ICRC will be publishing new footage from Al Hol on our ICRC Newsroom later today. [www.icrcnewsroom.org](http://www.icrcnewsroom.org)

**COVID-19: humanitarian situation in Libya**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that one year since the launch of a military offensive in Tripoli, Libya, fighting was further worsening with COVID-19 now bringing new threats. More than 300 civilians had been killed and 150,000 others displaced from their homes since last April. Despite the tentative agreement on a humanitarian truce, fighting had escalated significantly in the previous week. The deteriorating security had also undermined the ability of the tens of thousands of formerly displaced persons to safely return to their areas of origin. Meanwhile, the authorities had confirmed ten cases of COVID-19 and one death in Libya, raising new fears about the ability of the country’s
weakened health services to respond. UNHCR echoed the appeal of UN Secretary-General urging warring parties across the world to cease their fighting in support of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently there were no reported cases of refugees and asylum sectors infected with COVID-19, said Mr. Baloch in a response to a question.

Full press release is available here.

COVID-19: Sudan

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Sudan were having an impact on humanitarian access, deliveries and services. Seven COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in Sudan. There was a 6 pm-to-6 am curfew in place, closure of schools and reduction of staff in many government offices. There were 9.2 million people in Sudan who needed assistance, a third of whom were refugees and internally displaced people. Humanitarian partners were planning to organize advance food distribution of two to three months of rations at one time, which would limit the frequency of gatherings of people and the associated potential of spreading the coronavirus. New guidelines were being developed for health workers so that they could carry on immunizations and other critical tasks. In the Blue Nile State, humanitarian organizations were raising awareness on how to identify and isolate suspect cases. In South Darfur, the State Ministry of Health had identified two isolation centres and was procuring thermal detectors and protective equipment.

In a response to a question, Mr. Laerke stressed the importance of increasing awareness of the need to avoid gatherings and to maintain physical distancing. Gender-based violence confidential services were continuing, respecting the necessary distancing and hygiene measures. Gender-based violence remained a problem in Sudan, as in most other humanitarian crises, said Mr. Laerke.

COVID-19: fruits and vegetables markets in Europe

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), stated that closure of hotels, restaurants and caterings, cafés, canteens had a big impact, especially on fresh produce as well as some other produce and smaller specialized companies that supplied catering. The ban on open farmers’ markets in several countries was mostly affecting smaller farmers in the areas concerned. The sales in supermarkets were still good and pulling the market; however, after an initial peak in demand, the market for fresh fruit and vegetables had weakened now and prices might start falling because customers go shopping less frequently than before. Mr. Rodriguez further said that this sector was heavily dependent on foreign seasonal agricultural workforce, and many seasonal workers had returned to their respective home countries or were affected by travel bans and border closures. The growing shortage of labour deriving from the travel restrictions implemented by most countries to curb the spread of COVID-19, would soon be a major problem. While today there were still enough fruits and vegetables in shops and supermarkets, one could expect increased difficulties and price increases. UNECE reiterated its call to all countries to facilitate the cross-border flow of goods, in particular food, to the maximum extent possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to make full use of existing trade facilitation standards.

COVID-19: global employment figures

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), informed that the ILO would be releasing updated employment figures on 7 April. The report would particularly analyze the sectors and workers most affected by the pandemics and would call for a set of alleviating measures to be taken. A virtual press conference with Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, would take place at 2 pm on 7 April. The ILO report would be sent out on 6 April and would be under embargo until 4 pm on 7 April.

COVID-19: briefing by the UN Secretary-General
Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that the United Nations Secretary-General would release a report on the impact of his Call for a Global Ceasefire at a virtual press briefing today, Friday, 3 April at 10 AM New York time (4 PM Geneva time). The direct links to the live streaming coverage would be distributed by UNIS.

COVID-19: next briefing by the World Health Organization

Tarik Jasarevic, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that Kristalina Georgieva, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund would be joining the regular press briefing by the World Health Organization at 5:30 pm today.

Mr. Jasarevic also informed that, given that 2020 was the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, and 7 April was the World Health Day, a virtual press conference presenting the latest report on nurses would take place at 2 pm on 6 April. The majority of all health workers around the world were nurses, and they were on the front lines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemics. There was a dearth of some 5.9 million nurses around the world. The report would be shared today, to be under embargo until 7 April night.

Violent death of a youth offender in Iran

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that the OHCHR was horrified by the death of a juvenile offender after he had reportedly been badly beaten by security officers. According to information received by the OHCHR, Daniel Zeinolabedini had been put in solitary confinement and beaten by security officers in Mahabad prison in Orumiyeh city in West Azerbaijan Province after a riot on 28 March. Prisoners had been protesting at prison conditions and the failure of the authorities to temporarily release them amid the COVID-19 pandemic. OHCHR was particularly shocked as Zeinolabedini had been on death row for a crime he had allegedly committed in September 2017 at the age of 17. The imposition of the death penalty for crimes committed by people below the age of 18 at the time of the offence was strictly prohibited under international human rights law. OHCHR called on the Iranian authorities to immediately conduct an independent and impartial investigation into Zeinolabedini’s death and hold those responsible to account. Press briefing note is available here.

Insecurity in Burkina Faso

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that the UNHCR was extremely alarmed at growing insecurity in Burkina Faso, which was driving thousands of people out of their homes every day. As violence had spread across the Sahel region, Burkina Faso had witnessed a massive displacement of more than 838,000 people since January 2019, a figure which kept climbing with each passing day. The arrival of COVID-19 had added a new element of insecurity into the mix. UNHCR, working with the Malian authorities, had registered nearly 3,000 refugees in Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu regions. Panicked returnees, many with horror stories, were arriving on rented trucks or camel backs with their families. UNHCR worked with the authorities and partners on the ground, providing returning refugees with shelter, relief items and cash to support their initial needs. Full press release can be read here.

Postponement of COP26

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that, as it had already been announced, the COP26 UN climate change conference set to take place in Glasgow in November had been postponed for 2021. At the same time, she stressed that the economic and industrial downturn as a result of the coronavirus pandemic was not a substitute for concerted and coordinated climate action. Failure to reduce greenhouse gases and tackle climate change would have a negative impact on global economies, human living conditions and marine and land ecosystems, which might last up to centuries.

Ms. Nullis also informed that the WMO’s Hurricane Committee, which usually held a week-long meeting in the spring, had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Considerations for 2019 storm name
retirements had not been completed and would be addressed at the 2021 meeting, as the 2019 names would not be used again until 2025. The 2025 name list would not be updated until the 2021 meeting had been completed; the name Dorian would not yet be retired.

UNCTAD reports

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed that UNCTAD’s latest Investment Policy Monitor showed that investment policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic varied from country to country. They included measures supporting investors and domestic economies in general and policies to protect critical domestic infrastructure and industries, particularly in the health sector. UNCTAD would publish today on its website a mapping of digital challenges crucial in analyzing the COVID-19 crisis.

Ms. Huissoud further said that, in addition to the sanitary crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic was disrupting economic and social life in multiple ways and dimensions. This crisis was unfolding at a time characterized by rapid digitalization, which was helping in the decision-making process regarding response and adaptations to the situation by governments, businesses and consumers. However, differences in digital readiness hampered the ability of large parts of the world to take advantage of those technologies.

Geneva announcements

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that 4 April would be the International Mine Awareness Day, and the Secretary-General’s message had been shared with the media.

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The webcast for this briefing is available here: https://bit.ly/unog030420