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Story

COVID-19: Situation in Libya

Jens Laerke, for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), read out part of a statement by Deputy Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya, Yacoub El Hillo:

“I am appalled to have learned that heavy shelling hit Tripoli’s Al Khadra General Hospital today, injuring at least one health worker and damaging the fully-functioning medical facility. This is a clear violation of international humanitarian law.

The repeated calls by the United Nations and the international community for a cessation of hostilities have only been met with complete disregard and intensified fighting. This is unacceptable at a time when healthcare and health workers are vital in our fight against a global pandemic. The 400-bed Al Khadra hospital was one of the potential COVID-19 assigned health facilities.”

COVID-19: Preparedness in Somalia and the East, Horn and Great Lakes regions of Africa

Jens Laerke, for United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the United Nations and its humanitarian partners in Somalia were reprioritizing and reprogramming activities to help prepare for and respond to COVID-19. Somalia had so far recorded seven confirmed cases according to
WHO, and no deaths; it had closed schools, banned large gatherings and suspended international and domestic passenger flights. The humanitarian response focused on limiting the spread of the virus and preventing any new infections. Efforts were underway to enhance surveillance, rapid response and testing in order to enable the identification, diagnosis and tracing of all suspected cases. The risk of COVID-19 spreading in communities remained high because of crowded living conditions in urban centres combined with inadequate hygiene practices. Health workers had been deployed to all 23 officially designated points of entry, including the four international airports at Mogadishu, Garowe, Bossaso and Hargeisa. The land borders with neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya had been closed, halting cross-border movements of people.

Mr. Laerke added that of concern was the fact that the number of health workers in parts of the country was 2 per 100,000 people compared to the global standard of 25 per 100,000 people. Less than 20 per cent of health facilities had the required equipment and supplies to manage epidemics. There were 2.6 million internally displaced people who had limited or no access to health service in Somalia and 4.1 million food-insecure people, as well as people living in locust-infested or flood-prone areas.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), said that operational plans had been put in place that prioritized the most urgent needs amongst the most vulnerable segments of the population. An outbreak would devastate the already fragile healthcare system, and 1.3 million were already facing acute food insecurity. WFP would continue to provide food assistance to 500,000 pregnant women and children, as well as provide logistic support to the government.

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR was ramping up efforts to increase capacity to prevent, treat and limit the potential spread of COVID-19 among refugee communities across the East, Horn and Great Lakes region of Africa, which hosted some of the largest refugee populations in the world. Living in crowded conditions, without adequate access to water and sanitation facilities, and with precarious livelihoods and food security, refugees in the region were particularly vulnerable to the virus, both in refugee camps and in urban areas.

Following confirmation of the first cases of COVID-19 in South Sudan and Eritrea last week, all countries in the region were now responding to the outbreak. While to date there had been no confirmed cases amongst refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced people in the region, the need to be prepared was urgent. Full press release is available here.

Responding to a question about WFP’s logistical operations, Ms. Byrs for WFP said that the Programme was setting up new international hubs in key locations, namely Shanghai, Atlanta, and Liège. There was also a hub in Dubai. WFP had put in place measures, such as social distancing and hand washing, to protect its workers and the populations it served. WFP was currently aiding over 5 million people, including 160,000 children, she added.

Responding to questions about the situation in East, Horn and Great Lake regions, Mr. Baloch for UNHCR explained that more cases of COVID-19 were being detected and there was a risk that refugees and displaced people could be significantly impacted by the virus. He recalled that, overall, there were more than 12 million refugees and displaced persons in East, Horn and Great Lake regions. It was important that authorities and United Nations agencies worked hand in hand to ensure that refugees and displaced persons had access to healthcare services. The UNHCR had rolled out awareness-raising campaigns in the regions—using posters, flyers, bulk SMS and WhatsApp messages.

COVID-19: Gender-based violence

Denis McClean, for the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) said that measures to combat domestic violence need to be given attention and addressed by national disaster management agencies, according to a statement issued today by the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, Mami Mizutori, who is also the head of the United Nations Office for Disaster
Risk Reduction. McClean read out Mizutori’s statement, in which she says the following:

Women and girls are more affected by disasters generally because of the gender inequality evident in society at large. They die and are injured in greater numbers particularly in extreme weather events. This unfortunate reality has taken a new twist in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women and girls trapped in abusive domestic situations are in jeopardy because of the lock downs and restrictions on their movements imposed by governments to contain the spread of the pandemic.

I call on all national disaster management agencies to give attention to this urgent issue within their governments so that support to victims of domestic abuse are included in their COVID-19 response plans. This will save lives and prevent serious injury to many.

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said this statement echoed that of the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, who yesterday had said in a video message that “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes”. He had urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.

Responding to a journalist who inquired about the link between domestic violence and disaster risk reduction, Mr. McClean explained that women and girls were disproportionally affected by disasters. Furthermore, the risk of domestic violence has been a feature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it needed to be factored in response planning.

**UNECE: COVID-19 and guidelines on mobility management**

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) said that it was clear that the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic could not simply be a return to business as usual. With the mobility that societies took for granted severely limited in many countries due to emergency measures, one area that called for a critical reassessment was how it is possible to shift to more sustainable and efficient mobility. From tackling deadly air pollution to lowering carbon emissions and reducing congestion, the benefits of cutting down car use had made it a priority in many cities’ efforts to date. However, this shift could bring many challenges, with no one-size-fits-all approach. UNECE had issued guidance on mobility management to help policy makers navigate this key area.

**COVID-19's impact on employment and deferral of the International Labour Conference**

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), said the ILO would hold a press conference today at 2 p.m. on a report about COVID-19’s impact on employment, which notably dealt with sectors where workers were at risk of losing their jobs or having their working hours severely curtailed. The report, which included data by region and called for policy responses, was embargoed until today, 7 April, at 4 p.m.

The International Labour Conference, which was due to start at the end of May, had been deferred to June 2021 due to the severe travel restrictions and to maintain the health and wellbeing of staff and delegates. As consequence, governing body meetings, which were scheduled to take place right before and after the Conference, would not take place.

**Other COVID-19 related issues**

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, informed that since last week, there had been no changes in the number of COVID-19 cases in the United Nations Secretariat staff in Geneva, which currently stood at 10.

Responding to several questions on the COVID-19 situation in various countries reporting only few or no
cases, Christian Lindmeier for the World Health Organization (WHO) said that there were various factors that could lead to inaccurate reporting of COVID-19 cases, such as a lack of capacity; it was also important to keep in mind that different countries had different ways of classifying and reporting the number of infections and deaths. The WHO had been warning that the overstretching of health systems could increase risks related to other diseases. However, he did not have detailed figures on this matter, as it was very difficult to measure. On the timeline for a return to unrestricted activities, Mr. Lindmeier said it was important not to ease the measures too early. Risks should be carefully assessed to avoid fallbacks.

A journalist asked if WHO had recommendations regarding the handling of bodies of people who had died after being infected with COVID-19. Mr. Lindmeier said that such bodies did not pose a significant risk of infection, so no specific extra care was necessary.

Responding to a journalist who sought clarification on why the WHO Director-General had said that Africa would not serve as a testing ground for COVID-19 vaccines, Mr. Lindmeier said it was in response to headlines that had been published last week. These headlines had not been published by WHO, and the Director-General had clearly said that, no matter the country or region, any testing of vaccines had to follow proper protocols.

**Ebola**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO) said that the Emergency Committee would meet to assess the Ebola situation. The exact date had yet to be determined.

Noting that the end of a 42-day period without new Ebola cases was nearing, a journalist asked when the end of the outbreak in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo would be announced. Mr. Lindmeier replied that it was up to Government to declare the epidemic over and accordingly announce it.

**Situation in Burkina Faso**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), warned that more lives were at a risk in Burkina Faso’s Centre Nord and Sahel regions where hundreds of thousands of displaced people, including small children, were being forced to sleep out in the open at the mercy of the elements.

An estimated 350,000 people now needed urgent access to adequate shelter and water to help them cope with desert-like conditions in remote parts of Burkina Faso. Fresh insecurity was driving more people from their homes every day.

UNHCR was already alarmed that a chronic lack of resources was threatening a major humanitarian disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic was now further aggravating what was already a complex mix of crises. People were in desperate need of shelter in remote locations and facing harsh weather conditions. UNHCR was calling on all humanitarian actors to increase resources.

**Cyclone Harold and Vanuatu**

Denis McClean, for the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), said Vanuatu found itself in the nightmare scenario of having to prepare for a category 5 cyclone at the same time as trying to stop the arrival in his country of the COVID19 pandemic.

Category 5 Cyclone Harold hitting Vanuatu and threatening other islands, including Tonga and Fiji, would have considerable consequences. It was, however, important to say that Vanuatu and other Pacific Islands which would face the wrath of Cyclone Harold had very well-developed disaster management systems which would keep mortality from such events low.

Unfortunately, the economic losses and damage to critical infrastructure were likely to be considerable with knock-on effects for their overall ability to fight the COVID-19 pandemic including damage to health.
facilities, loss of housing, damage to water and sanitation and other important infrastructure, the scale of which had not yet been determined. No cases of COVID-19 had been reported so far but the rules on social distancing had had to be suspended as thousands of people moved to safe shelters and evacuation centres to escape the storm.

**Launch of the WTO Trade Forecast 2020-21 and 2019 Trade Outcomes**

Fernando Puchol, for the World Trade Organization (WHO), said the WTO would release its 2020-21 trade growth forecast and 2019 trade statistics on 8 April at 3 p.m. Geneva time, with a media video-conference with Director-General Roberto Azevêdo.

Those who were not able to take part could still watch the press conference via WTO’s YouTube channel.

**World Health Day**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO) said that on this World Health Day, celebrated by the international community on 7 April, the WHO was paying tribute to all health workers who were at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19, particularly nurse and midwives. On World Health Day and the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, WHO was calling on renewed support for these health workers, so everybody may have access to the healthcare they need.

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the UN Secretary-General had issued a video message to mark World Health Day. He had noted that World Health Day this year came at a very difficult time for all, and that he was deeply grateful to our healthcare workers – the nurses, midwives, technicians, paramedics, pharmacists, doctors, drivers, cleaners, administrators and many others – who worked, day and night to keep everyone safe.

**Anniversary of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda**

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that 7 April marked the Anniversary of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The Secretary-General of the United Nations had released today a video message marking the anniversary of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda—when more than one million people had been systematically murdered in just 100 days. Noting that the victims were overwhelmingly Tutsi, but also included Hutu and others who opposed the genocide, the Secretary-General had said that Rwanda had demonstrated that it is possible to rise from the ashes, to heal and to rebuild a stronger, more sustainable society.

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The webcast for this briefing is available here: https://bit.ly/unog070420