Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of Press and External Relations of the United Nations Information Service, said that in a message published yesterday, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, had extended his warmest wishes as millions of Muslims around the world began observing the holy month of Ramadan. The Secretary-General had noted that this would be a very different Ramadan, as community activities would be affected by measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and many people in conflict zones would once again be tragically marking this month with war and insecurity all around. The Secretary-General had recalled his appeal for an immediate global ceasefire to focus on a common enemy — the virus.

Martin Griffiths, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, had conveyed a similar message. He had called on the parties to the conflict to be guided by the spirit of the Holy month and put an end to the suffering of their people: “Put down the arms. Release all those who lost their liberty due to the conflict. Open humanitarian corridors. Focus on coordinating your efforts to help your country respond to the pandemic outbreak and other emergency needs.”

Finally, in a message issued for the International Day for Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, the Secretary-General had said that the COVID-19 pandemic was “a tragic reminder of how deeply connected we are. The virus knows no borders and was a quintessential global challenge. Combatting it requires us to work together as one human family.” However, multilateralism was not only a matter of confronting shared
COVID-19: Humanitarian community’s response to COVID-19 worldwide

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the coronavirus pandemic had now reached every corner of the world with more than 2.5 million confirmed cases. The virus was in virtually all the countries that had already identified as humanitarian crises or settings at the end of last year. Today, lockdowns, curfews and restrictions on movements of cargo and personnel – part of the strategy to slow down the transmission of the virus – were challenging the humanitarian response.

International responders – the non-governmental organizations, United Nations and the Red Cross and Red Crescent – needed to reach people with specific COVID-19 assistance but also to continue their life-saving work for about 117 million women, men and children that are caught in conflict, poverty and climate-related emergencies.

Full press release can be found here.

COVID-19: Clampdown on the independent media

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, was alarmed by restrictive measures imposed by several States against the independent media – as well as the arrest and intimidation of journalists – given how important the free flow of information is in fighting COVID-19.

The High Commissioner had said that “some States have used the outbreak of the new coronavirus as a pretext to restrict information and stifle criticism. A free media is always essential, but we have never depended on it more than we do during this pandemic, when so many people are isolated and fearing for their health and livelihoods. Credible, accurate reporting is a lifeline for all of us.” She also drew attention to how some political leaders had made statements about journalists and media workers that had created a hostile environment for their safety and their ability to do their work.

According to the International Press Institute, there had been over 130 alleged media violations since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, including more than 50 reported instances of restrictions on access to information, censorship and excessive regulation of misinformation. Nearly 40 journalists had reportedly been arrested or charged in the Asia-Pacific, Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Africa for reports critical of the State response to the pandemic – or simply for questioning the accuracy of official numbers of cases and deaths related to COVID-19. The actual number of media violations and arrests was probably far higher.

More information can be found in OHCHR’s press release, here.

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of Press and External Relations of the United Nations Information Service, said the Secretary-General had expressed similar concerns on 14 April, and warned against a global “misinfo-demic.” He had also saluted journalists and others’ fact-checking work, and stressed that this was a time for science and solidarity.

Responding to journalists’ questions, Mr. Colville noted that the kind of leaders who were criticizing journalists in a disturbing manner were often the usual suspects, that is leaders who had previously engaged in similar behavior, refusing to tolerate criticisms of their policies and free debate. There was a worrying trend of attacks against journalists, Mr. Colville added, citing instances in the United States, Turkey, Bangladesh, Tanzania, the Philippines, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Guatemala, China and Mexico, amongst other countries.

Asked about the impact of President Trump’s press briefings on an effective and coordinated response to the pandemic, Mr. Colville said journalists played an important role, especially as regards complex issues
related to the pandemic, such as when and how it was safe to ease restrictions. Such issues required a public debate.

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of Press and External Relations of the United Nations Information Service, said the UN was countering misinformation by monitoring the situation and using the communication channels at its disposal to address misconceptions and debunk myths. The Secretary-General had mentioned this work in his April 14 statement.

COVID-19: Refugee health workers in Latin America

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that countries across Latin America were calling on refugee and migrant health workers to support their national responses to COVID-19. Across the region, thousands were now working with national health systems responding to the pandemic while many more stood ready to support and give back to the communities sheltering them. As COVID-19 cases increase by the day and already over-stretched health systems strain under mounting pressure, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, was supporting these efforts that tap into the skills and resources that refugee medics could provide.

Several countries in the region had now put in place special measures. These authorized the hiring of foreign-qualified health professionals and technicians, including those awaiting licensing or whose certification was yet to be validated by host countries. Other states had adopted expedited recognition processes to fast-track their inclusion in national health responses. Peru had now authorized the hiring of foreign certified health professionals of any nationality to support the COVID-19 response. As emergency measures, Argentina and Chile had authorized the hiring of health professionals whose qualifications have not as yet been validated by national authorities.

More details can be found in the UNHCR briefing note.

Responding to questions, Ms. Mantoo said that, in Brazil, the Government had extended the entitlement of some Cuban doctors to work in the country. In Mexico, the UNHCR was working with authorities to ensure refugees who had experience could support national efforts, and so far 80 refugees with a relevant background had been identified. UNHCR was also working on setting up a fast-track mechanism to identify refugees with the experience and skillset to assist with the pandemic response.

COVID-19: Food insecurity in Haiti

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Organization (WFP), said close to 4 million Haitians needed urgent food assistance, at least 1 million of whom suffered from severe hunger (IPC phase 4), according to a nationwide study conducted in October 2019 by the Government, with support from WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Poor economic and security conditions compounded by climate shocks and the long-term impact of natural disasters had worsened the acute food insecurity. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government restrictions on movements and gatherings were expected to put a further strain on the poorest households, pushing even more Haitians into severe hunger.

It was vital that at this time of crisis for WFP maintain and scale up its food assistance programmes in the country. WFP had restarted its emergency food and cash distributions in Artibonite, Nippes, Grand’Anse, Ouest and North departments, all with adaptive measures to protect the health of communities, partners and staff. In the first 4 months of 2020, WFP had reached 200,000 people. As COVID-19 forced school closures, WFP had started to provide take-home food rations to schoolchildren and their families. In normal times, WFP’s school meals programmes provided a daily hot school meal to approximately 300,000 children.

Ms. Byrs added that the situation in Port-au-Prince, where 850,000 people were food insecure, and the high food prices were also a source of concern. WFP’s role in Haiti went beyond food assistance, as it also provided logistics services to the entire humanitarian community – among them, a helicopter continued to fly daily to move essential humanitarian staff as well as medical supplies and hospital equipment to the hard-
COVID-19: New partnership

Fadela Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that today at 3 p.m., Geneva time, WHO would launch a global collaboration to accelerate development, production, and equitable global access to new COVID-19 essential health tools. The event would be co-hosted by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Alongside evidence-based public health measures, innovative COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines were needed – in record time and at record scale and access. Lessons from the past had shown that even with the right tools at the world’s disposal, massive deficits in equitable access and fair allocation – and the structures and systems that support these aims – had resulted in unequal access. Such inequity was unacceptable. All tools to address COVID-19 must be available to all people. In the fight against COVID-19, no one could be left behind.

The participants would include heads of State and Government and other key private and public actors. The event would be entirely virtual, hosted by WHO, and broadcast on WHO and EU platforms.

Asked to comment about the President of Brazil’s comments on WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus’ credential, Ms. Chaib said the biography of Dr. Tedros was available on WHO’s website. He had a public health background. WHO also relied on thousands of experts around the world to guide its work.

COVID-19: Human rights concerns related to exceptional and emergency measures

Rupert Colville, from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that on Monday 27 April at 10.30 a.m. OHCHR would hold a press briefing on human rights concerns related to exceptional and emergency measures in the context of the pandemic. The OHCHR’s policy guidance for States would be launched then. Speakers would be Peggy Hicks, Director of Thematic Engagement, and Georgette Gagnon, Director of Field Operations for the OHCHR.

Killing of human rights defenders in Colombia

Rupert Colville, from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the situation in the Cauca department of Colombia, where at least 13 human rights defenders were reported to have been killed so far this year – including three in the past few days – was deeply worrying.

Although these latest cases were still being verified by OHCHR, it had received reports that, on 22 April, Hugo de Jesús Giraldo, a social leader, had been killed in the town of Santander de Quilichao. Last weekend, two other social leaders, Mario Chilhueso and Teodomiro Sotelo Anacona, had also been killed, as well as the husband of a third social leader.

A growing number of armed groups, as well as criminal groups fighting for the control of illicit economies in this territory, were behind most of the attacks, which had been increasing in recent months. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the Government and by communities themselves to avoid the spread of the virus seemed to have aggravated an already violent and volatile situation.

Armed groups and criminal groups appeared to be taking advantage of the fact that most of the people were in lockdown to expand their presence and control over the territory.

In addition to what appeared to be targeted killings of human rights defenders and social leaders, OHCHR had received daily reports of threats – including death threats – and harassment against the local population, including against farmers, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities who were trying to ensure
confinement and prevention measures were complied with.

In some parts of Cauca department, clashes between security forces and armed groups and criminal groups had intensified, including in indigenous territories. Civilians had been caught in the violence, resulting in the death of an indigenous child in Toribio and the forced displacement of rural communities in Argelia and El Tambo.

OHCHR was also worried about attacks against FARC-EP ex-combatants. According to the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, 36 had been killed in Cauca since the peace agreement was signed in November 2016.

OHCHR called on all those involved in this violence to halt the fighting, in line with the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire, so that measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 could be properly implemented.

OHCHR reminded the authorities of their obligation to prevent attacks and protect the local population. Any attack against human rights defenders undermined democratic space, including the right to participate. An integral response of civil and security authorities was particularly relevant in rural areas.

OHCHR urged the Government to conduct thorough, prompt, independent and impartial investigations into all allegations of human rights violations and to hold perpetrators to account. All victims and their families had the right to justice, truth and reparations.

Responding to questions, Mr. Colville said that, in Colombia, since the beginning of the year, 19 killings of human rights defenders and social leaders had been verified by OHCHR, and 34 other cases were in the process of verification.

World Intellectual Property Day and Beijing Treaty on Audiovisual Performances

Edward Harris, for the World Intellectual Property Organization, said innovation in environmentally friendly technologies as measured by international patent applications barely rose in 2019, according to new WIPO figures released for World Intellectual Property Day 2020. This had prompted a call from WIPO Director-General Francis Gurry for a green tech surge to fight climate change.

Marking the "World IP Day 2020: Innovate for a Green Future" on 26 April, WIPO had analyzed international patent filings via its Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) in four categories of green energy technologies.

More details can be found in the WIPO’s press release.

Mr. Harris added that the Beijing Treaty on Audiovisual Performances would come into force on 28 April and could from that day begin improving earning conditions for actors and other audiovisual performers – a development with added importance amid the negative impact on cultural production by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Treaty was designed to help audiovisual performers – television and film actors, musicians, dancers, and others – many of whom live from job to job in precarious economic circumstances. The Treaty expanded audiovisual workers' performance-related rights, which could translate into increased payments from retransmission, an especially critical benefit as many new productions were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNCTAD announcements

Catherine Huissoud, from the United Nations Centre for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said an interesting news story had been published on UNCTAD’s website on how Senegal’s e-commerce sector helped the country cope with COVID-19. The trade ministry fast-tracked measures to ease access to
essential goods and services during the pandemic, implementing recommendations made by UNCTAD experts on how to boost e-commerce in the country, and not only in the capital.

She added that, as the world marked the International Day of Multilateralism today, UNCTAD Annual Report for 2019 showed what could be accomplished when people worked together. COVID-19 threatened to send more countries deeper into crisis. As the world tackled this huge challenge, the report shone a light on what was possible if the international community looked beyond uncertainty and worked multilaterally to promote prosperity for all. It was a revisited e-format only publication.

Ms. Huissoud added that an op-ed on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism revenues and debt levels in SIDS by Pamela Coke-Hamilton, Director of the international trade division, would be published today. On Monday, the latest data on e-commerce with a B2C ranking would be published.

The eWeek would also open on Monday. The programme was available online.

ILO announcements

Reading a statement on behalf of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Rhéal LeBlanc said that a virtual press conference would be held on “Protect workers as COVID-19 lockdowns ease” on 27 April on the occasion of the World Day for Safety and Health.

ILO’s latest COVID-19 monitor report would be launched on 29 April, and a virtual press conference with Guy Ryder, Director-General of ILO, would be held on that occasion.

Geneva announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of Press and External Relations of the United Nations Information Service, said that on Monday, 27 April at 2.30 p.m., the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) would hold a press conference on policy response to the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UNECE region. The speaker would be Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary of UNECE.