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Story

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COVID-19 pandemic

Supply chain logistics

Tarik Jašarević, for the World Health Organization (WHO), introduced Paul Molinaro, Chief of the Operations Support and Logistics, WHO Health Emergencies Programme.

In his briefing to the journalists, Mr. Molinaro said that over the last two years, WHO had built a small but agile unit to support operations in outbreaks; the unit had been very busy with Ebola response over the past two years. The crisis that had emerged since January 2020, particularly in the field of supply chain logistics, had shown the challenges on a global scale, including an unprecedented demand for certain items. This was especially the case for personal protective equipment (PPE); diagnostics, since test were just being created
after genetic sequencing had been shared; and biomedical clinical equipment.

The challenges included the increased demand (a hundred or two hundred times the normal one), the shutdowns and the reduced manufacturing on the supply side, export controls and the gradual shutting down of the international air transport system. The UN Secretary-General had requested WHO to convene a task force to seek solutions to those issues.

In Geneva, UNICEF, WFP and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) had joined the Supply Chain Coordination Cell for COVID-19. The Cell operated on four principles: streamlined demand at the country level, to look at the highest priorities and coordinate response; collaborative procurement and approaching market together to give the UN a stronger voice; allocation processes based on vulnerabilities, gaps and critical needs; and creating a unified transport system.

Mr. Molinaro stressed the enormous challenges that other humanitarian operations experienced in the current context; UNICEF vaccine shipments, highly dependent on commercial cargo, had already been disrupted in April. If logistical constraints continued in May, this would most likely disrupt regular immunization activities as well as food supply chains.

Responding to questions, Mr. Molinaro said that in February this year, PPE markets had not been responsive to the needs. Many of the suppliers and manufacturers, based in China, had been affected by the spread of the coronavirus in Wuhan, which had slowed down the manufacturing process.

On tests, the 1.1 million units distributed so far had been delivered to 126 countries. Quantities per country were small, but the hope was to have enough tests in each country to identify the imported cases and clusters forming around them. This had been achieved with success; however, the spread in the transmission and the occurrence in the community transmission meant that the supply of tests had to be scaled up.

A number of partners in the consortium were working to determine where the next batch of tests would go. It was expected that in May, the number of distributed tests would increase five-fold, said Mr. Molinaro. The validated tests and essays that had been distributed originated from manufacturers in Germany, China, the United States and several European countries. The consortium, which negotiated on behalf of over 120 countries, had obtained a degree of preferential pricing.

Explaining the logistical and supply system, Mr. Molinaro said that the logistical centre in Africa was located in Accra, and the hope was to add Addis Ababa and Johannesburg as air hubs. The intention was also to increase humanitarian flights for personnel, too. WFP was in charge of the day-to-day management of the air hubs, he added. As for Latin America, a hub was in place in Panama. Acknowledging the initial difficulties in supplying countries in this part of the world, Mr. Molinaro said that the next allocation of PPE, tests and other supplies could be directed to Latin America, also given the rising number of COVID-19 cases there.

Existing vaccine distribution mechanisms could be used to effectively acquire and distribute COVID-19 vaccine, Mr. Molinaro said in response to a question about the consortium’s capacity to supply the future vaccine. On dead body management, there were no constraints on body bags, he said.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), added that her agency was awaiting the starting date for the humanitarian air bridge from Geneva, Rome, Accra, Addis Ababa and other destinations. Additional information would be available at the end of the week, she said.

- **The number of food insecure people in East and Horn of Africa to reach 41 million because of COVID-19**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), said that the spread of the coronavirus across East and Horn of Africa, where the situation was already dire, would have a massive impact because of weak economies, poor health infrastructure and other factors. Currently, 20 million people
were food insecure in nine countries in the region: Ethiopia, South Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Djibouti and Eritrea. Over the next three months, the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 would most likely increase the number of food insecure people from 34 to 41 million. Nearly 17 million urban poor and 3.5 million refugees would depend on humanitarian aid for survival.

- **COVID-19 control measures constrain humanitarian response to Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu**

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said that IOM was appealing for US$ 4 million to respond to urgent needs in the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu in the aftermath of the recent devastating Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold, which had directly impacted over half of the country’s 272,000 residents. Impairing the immediate and long-term response was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a country that relies on tourism for up to 65 per cent of its gross domestic product. Flight restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic and the mandatory 14-day quarantine period for new arrivals were also impacting the transport and distribution of humanitarian supplies and other forms of assistance to people in need. In line with emerging best practices in responding to dual humanitarian challenges, relief supplies were being quarantined for at least 72 hours and disinfected before being distributed. [Full statement](#).

A representative of the association of UN accredited journalists urged the International Organization for Migration to arrange a press conference with António Vitorino, IOM Director-General, for Geneva-based journalists.

- **Sudan: COVID-19 and transition**

Jeremy Laurence, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Tuesday had expressed serious concerns about the crisis facing Sudan’s transition in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Barely a year after the removal from power of long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir, the promise of economic and social development, democracy, justice and peace was now being threatened by acute resource constraints on the Transitional Government of Sudan. These were being exacerbated by a combination of the practical effects of ongoing unilateral sanctions, the failure of international institutions to provide debt relief, and a deficit of international support.

“The tipping point,” the UN Human Rights Chief said, “could be COVID-19.” Medical sources warned there was a serious shortage of equipment and protective gear. As of 27 April, 275 people had been tested positive with COVID-19, 22 of whom had died. “There is only one way to prevent a humanitarian disaster, and that is for the donors to step up and extend a helping hand to Sudan,” said Bachelet. The briefing note can be accessed on OHCHR [News and Events page](#).

A journalist noted that, because the United States continued to designate Sudan as a State sponsoring terrorism, the country continued to be excluded from accessing funding for COVID-19 response. Asked about the consequences, Mr. Laurence said that talks were taking place about Sudan’s removal from the list of States sponsoring terrorism. Answering another question, he stressed the importance of the freedom of expression and freedom of speech in times of pandemic and underlined that the media must be allowed to do their job properly and professionally.

- **Ten-point plan to bolster global transport, ease trade during COVID-19**

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that UNCTAD had proposed a [Ten-point plan to bolster global transport and ease trade during COVID-19](#). Its main objective was to facilitate the delivery of essential goods wherever needed in the world, including by ensuring uninterrupted shipping, keeping ports open, facilitating cross-border transport and safeguarding transparency and up-to-date information. The Ten-point plan had echoed an earlier call by UNCTAD Secretary-General Mukhisa Kituyi to keep ships moving, ports open and cross-border trade flowing during
this crisis period, said Ms. Huissoud.

Later today, a tribute on export restrictions by Pamela Coke, UNCTAD Director of the International Trade Division, would be available on UNCTAD’s website. Medical supplies accounted for 5 per cent of world merchandise trade and were concentrated among a small number of exporters - an efficient response to COVID-19 could not be successful without those key players. Unfortunately, illustrating a rise in national self-interest, some of the largest exporters at various points indicated that they would cease the export of key medical products.

Ms. Huissoud added that UNCTAD would present a new study on data protection and privacy, which noted that significant gaps in the adoption of cybersecurity legislation left consumers vulnerable during the coronavirus crisis when accessing goods and services online. Also, the fifteenth Quadrennial Conference of UNCTAD, scheduled to take place from 18 to 23 October in Barbados, had been postponed.

- **ILO to launch Monitor 3rd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work on 29 April**

Rosalind Yarde, for International Labour Organization (ILO), said that on Wednesday 29 April, ILO would launch its third update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global employment and labour markets. The new report would include updated estimates on the number of working hours and equivalent jobs that would be lost, the impact on informal economies around the world and on the millions of enterprises, particularly small businesses. There would also be updates on the employment impact in Africa, Americas, Asia, Pacific, Arab States and Europe. The report also outlined the urgent policy responses that were needed to address and lessen the impact of the pandemic on the world of work.

An embargoed virtual press conference with ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder would take place at 11.30 a.m. Geneva time on 29 April. The Director of the Employment Policy Department, Sangheon Lee would also be speaking, Ms. Yarde announced.

**United Nations and COVID-19**

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva (UNIS), informed the journalists that on 27 April, Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, had launched the **UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19**. This framework put into practice the Secretary-General’s report **Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19** released in March 2020.

The Deputy Secretary-General had also launched the “**Women Rising for All**” initiative, which put women leaders at the forefront and called the world to action for the responses that would be needed on the health, the economic and the humanitarian front. The initiative included many high-level women, including Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Prime Minister of Barbados, and Melinda Gates of the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation, under the leadership of Sahle-Work Zewde, President of Ethiopia and Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway.

In her update on COVID-19 cases among the UN Secretariat staff in Geneva, Ms. Vellucci said that the total number of confirmed cases among the United Nations Office at Geneva staff was 17.

Answering questions, Ms. Vellucci said that the UN staff were treated by the public health system, on a par with the rest of the population. The medical service of the UN Geneva served as the first step for the unwell staff members.

While schools were due to reopen in Switzerland on 11 May, it was not clear whether the Palais would open then. The decision on the date to ease the confinement in UN Geneva had not been taken yet. As for the press briefing, a hybrid format was being considered.
Libya: OHCHR concerns over expulsion of migrants and refugees and conditions in detention facilities

Jeremy Laurence, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), raised concern about the expulsions of at least 1,400 migrants and refugees this year from eastern Libya, most of whom had been sent to Sudan, Niger, Chad, and Somalia. In its recent guidance on COVID-19 and the human rights of migrants, OHCHR stressed that border controls and other measures must comply with the principle of non-refoulement and the prohibition of collective expulsions. It had recommended States to temporarily suspend carrying out forced returns during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to safeguard the human rights, health and safety of all concerned, Mr. Laurence recalled.

He also expressed serious concerns for the welfare of thousands of migrants held in crowded and unhygienic official detention facilities and unofficial sites across the country, where they were at risk of serious human rights violations and abuses, amid the spread of COVID-19. Those concerns were compounded by the fact that many of the detention centres were located in areas close to ongoing hostilities. The United Nations repeatedly said that such detentions were fundamentally arbitrary and had called for the closure of the detention facilities. In the context of COVID-19, release from immigration detention to safe place should be urgently prioritized, Mr. Laurence concluded. The briefing note can be accessed on OHCHR News and Events page.

Mexico: despite pandemic restrictions, people fleeing violence and persecution continue to seek asylum

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), noted that, while a number of countries throughout Latin America and the rest of the world had closed their borders and restricted movement to contain the spread of coronavirus, Mexico had continued to register new asylum claims from people fleeing brutal violence and persecution, helping them find safety. By designating the registration of new asylum claims an essential activity, Mexico had ensured that people receive protection from being forced to return to their countries of origin, where their lives may be in danger. These practices showed that long-standing principles of international refugee law could be upheld even as governments take measures to protect public health.

In the first three months of the year, asylum applications in Mexico had been up by 33 per cent, compared to the same period last year. The nearly 17,800 new asylum claims in 2020 had been principally from nationals of Honduras, Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador and Venezuela. UNHCR also welcomed the recent announcement by Mexican immigration authorities to release all detained migrants and asylum-seekers and since March 16, it had supported the release of 434 asylum-seekers from immigration detention. Briefing note in full.

Answering questions, Ms. Mantoo reiterated the concern about the movement of people during the pandemic and stressed that it was important to examine how States managed both the threat of COVID-19 and their borders and the asylum process. The Mexican Government was accepting asylum applications, whose rate had increased compared to the previous year. This showed that Mexico was not only a transit country but a country where people were seeking asylum, a place where people went to save their lives, Ms. Mantoo concluded.

Yemen: shortfall threatens critical aid for nearly one million displaced and refugees

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), expressed concern that nearly one million vulnerable displaced people and refugees in Yemen were at risk of losing their shelter, vital cash assistance for essentials like food and medicine, and much more. Urgent funding was needed in the coming weeks to keep the lifesaving aid programmes running. Yemen was already considered to be the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. The country is now also facing the overlapping threat of the coronavirus pandemic, and the impact of recent torrential rain and flooding.

It was estimated that more than 3.6 million people had been forced to flee their homes in Yemen since the
start of the latest conflict in 2015. Only Syria, Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had larger internal displacement driven by conflict. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that conflict and violence displaced nearly 400,000 people in 2019 alone. UNHCR was urgently seeking US$89.4 million to secure life-saving protection and assistance to internally displaced families, refugees, and asylum-seekers and the hosting communities and had received US$58.4 million or 28 per cent of the 2020 required funding. Read more.

Announcements: Syria

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva (UNIS), said that on Wednesday 29 April, the UN Envoy for Syria, Mr. Geir O. Pedersen, would address the UN Security Council via VTC at 10 a.m. New York time, in an open briefing. In the afternoon, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock would brief the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria.