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Story

PRESS BRIEFING BY THE INFORMATION SERVICE

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the virtual briefing, which was attended by the spokespersons and representatives for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The topics addressed were COVID-19 and the seventy-third World Health Assembly.

COVID-19: impact on Africa

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), spoke about the new estimates on food insecurity in West Africa. Over 21.2 million people in that region would struggle to feed themselves during the upcoming lean season (June-August) without sustained assistance; an additional 22 million could also struggle to feed themselves in the coming six months because of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. Many of them were not only hungry or malnourished, but also displaced because of the conflicts in their home regions. Sustained aid efforts by the international community were needed. An adequate response was needed so that the future wellbeing of tens of millions of people across the region is protected, particularly women and children. There were an estimated 12 million children between 6 and 59 months in the region who could be
acutely malnourished during the lean season, up from 8.2 million children the previous year. WFP was requiring USD 574 million to adequately address this urgent situation in West Africa over the next six months.

Responding to questions, Ms. Byrs said that the countries of particular concern included the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso, among others. There were 2.2 million children in West Africa who depended on school meals, which they were currently not receiving due to school closures. Ms. Byrs stated that both the traditional donors and the private sector were on board, and the WFP was rather optimistic in this regard.

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), added that West and Central Africa had 5.6 million internally displaced persons and over 1.3 million refugees. Only in Burkina Faso, more than 800,000 people had been displaced due to the insecurity since January 2019, said Mr. Baloch.

**COVID-19: situation in Afghanistan**

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), stated that Afghanistan was struggling to safely absorb over 271,000 people who had returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan since January at a time when infection rates in Kabul were worryingly high. With almost 2,900 confirmed cases and 90 deaths as of 5 May, Afghan officials had emphasized that short of urgent action, up to 80 per cent of the country’s total population of 35 million could eventually be infected. A key constraint hindering a meaningful response to the pandemic was the low capacity for testing. Another grave concern was that Afghanistan had extremely limited infrastructure to treat severe cases. Social distancing was unfeasible in a country where the average family size was seven and most people lived in small, one-room homes with poor ventilation.

IOM was providing training, personal protection equipment and other critical medical supplies for local health workers and supporting risk communication and community engagement in 25 provinces across 10,000 communities through our data collection tool the Displacement Tracking Matrix. Each year, IOM Afghanistan provided humanitarian assistance to tens of thousands of undocumented Afghans returning from Iran. IOM was appealing for an additional USD 5 million in financial support from donor partners to scale up lifesaving COVID-19 response actions in Afghanistan.

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), added that displacement in Afghanistan was ongoing, and that, like the international community, Afghans themselves were hoping that the current peace process would bear fruit. He said that almost 50 percent of those randomly tested for COVID-19 in Kabul had tested positive.

**COVID-19: prison conditions in the Americas**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that conditions in many prisons in the Americas region were deeply worrying. Pre-existing structural problems, such as chronic overcrowding and unhygienic conditions, coupled with the lack of proper access to healthcare had enabled the rapid spread of COVID-19 in many facilities. Thousands of inmates and prison officials had already been infected across North and South America. In many countries, the increasing fear of contagion and lack of basic services, such as the regular provision of food due to the prohibition of family visits, had triggered protests and riots.

The scale the gravity of the incidents indicated that States had not taken appropriate measures to prevent incidents. OHCHR reminded authorities everywhere that the use of force needed to be proportionate, and that authorities had an obligation to protect inmates’ physical and mental wellbeing. Independent inquiries ought to be conducted into the circumstances of the deaths and injuries during riots, including any allegation of use of force violations by state agents. States were called upon to take necessary steps to stop further spread of the virus, and to guarantee proper access to food and drinkable water. Conditions of detention
should be regularly monitored by independent bodies, and ill detainees ought to be provided appropriate medical care.

Full OHCHR briefing note can be found [here](#).

In an answer to a question, Mr. Colville stated that the United States had a large prison population, and a significant number of COVID-19 cases had been recorded in prisons across the country. An additional issue in the US was that of immigration detention, where a concern was that not enough testing was taking place. On a positive side, tens of thousands of people were reported to have been released in the country. In some countries in the Americas, said Mr. Colville, the overcrowding in prisons was massive, going up to 500 percent of the available places, which made the spread of COVID-19 in prisons ever more dangerous. Mr. Colville referred to the 25 March appeal by the High Commissioner to States to reduce prison overcrowding. Mr. Colville, responding to another question, said that certain categories of prisoners, such as those responsible for mass crimes and crimes against humanity, should not be released, but had to, nonetheless, be protected from COVID-19 while serving their sentences.

**COVID-19: general update**

Christian Lindmeier, for the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), said that the regular weekly update by the Pan-American Health Organization would be held today at 5 pm Geneva time, and journalists were invited to listen in and ask some of their questions then. Regarding reports of an early COVID-19 case in France, allegedly dating back to December 2019, Mr. Lindmeier said that it was possible that some of the infected people from Wuhan had travelled to Europe already in December. Those findings would help better understand the early circulation of COVID-19. It was possible that more such cases could be found if countries started to retest some of the early samples. Given that the first confirmed case in China had been recorded on 31 December 2019, it was very probable that the first cases there had occurred already in early December or even in November.

Responding to further questions, Mr. Lindmeier said that on the American continent, Brazil was now the second most affected country with some 92,000 confirmed cases. A comprehensive set of measures was needed there, as elsewhere, and included both testing and tracing. Decisions on possible lock downs were to be made by each country individually. All possible treatments or vaccines needed to be checked and tested before being approved and used widely, said Mr. Lindmeier. He also emphasized that it was important to establish a definite origin of the virus, and identify an intermediary which may have helped transmit the virus from a bat to a human. There was no scientific insight yet on whether blood clots contributed to the spread or re-emergence of the virus. Mr. Lindmeier furthermore confirmed that the WHO’s recommendations on travel and trade remained the same; aggressive testing and tracing of suspected cases and contacts was the preferred way to go.

**Seventy-third World Health Assembly**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that the next World Health Assembly (18-19 May) and the Executive Board (22 May) would both take place virtually. Those two meetings would focus on the COVID-19 response and executive body elections. Duration of the meetings could be adjusted if needed; the steering committee would meet on 6 May to finalize the plans. All WHA meetings would be webcast; there would be no need for accreditations, as the sessions would be directly transmitted online. Mr. Lindmeier reiterated that it was up to Member States, and not up the Secretariat of the WHO, to decide on whether to invite Taiwan to take part in the upcoming World Health Assembly. Technical cooperation between the WHO and Taiwan was ongoing, he emphasized.

**Geneva announcements**

Rosalind Yarde, for the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO), informed that on Thursday, 7 May at 2 p.m. the ILO would hold a virtual press conference on the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers around
the world. The speakers would be Philippe Marcadent, Chief of the ILO’s INWORK branch, together with experts from Asia, Africa and Latin America and Caribbean, who would be available to take questions, including on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers. Relevant materials would be shared with the media in advance.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed about a press conference taking place today at 3 p.m.: Secretary-General of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Houlin Zhao would brief the media on digital transformation in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other speakers would be Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director, ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau; Mario Maniewicz, Director, ITU Radiocommunication Bureau; and Dr. Reinhard Scholl, Deputy Director, ITU Telecommunication Standardization Bureau.

Ms. Vellucci also informed that on 7 May, the international community was marking the Vesak, the day commemorating the birth, enlightenment and attainment of nirvana of Buddha. The Secretary-General’s message on that occasion had been shared.

Another policy brief by the UN Secretary-General, this time on the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities, was expected on 6 May, said Ms. Vellucci.

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed that today was both the Day of the Midwives and the Hand Hygiene Day.