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Story

COVID-19: Impact on the global weather observing system

Clare Nullis, for World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said WMO was concerned about the increasing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quantity and quality of weather observations and forecasts, as well as atmospheric and climate monitoring. Meteorological measurements taken from aircraft had plummeted by an average 75 to 80 per cent compared to normal, with very large regional variations; in the southern hemisphere, the loss was closer to 90 per cent. Large parts of the observing system, for instance its satellite components and many ground-based observing networks, were either partly or fully automated. But if the pandemic was prolonged, then missing repair, maintenance and supply work, and missing redeployments would become of increasing concern. Surface-based weather observations were in decline, especially in Africa and parts of Central and South America where many stations were manual rather than automatic and were so badly affected by the current lockdowns and mandatory teleworking policies.

A press release is available here.

Responding to questions, Ms. Nullis said the global observing system was as strong as its weakest link. Weather forecast was based on numerical weather predictions, which required a constant supply of observations from around the world.
Charley Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said heavy flooding, conflict, a crippled economy, impending desert locust swarms and the exponential spread of COVID-19 were threatening the safety and welfare of Somalia’s 2.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs). UNHCR feared these multiple, compounding emergencies would lead to devastating consequences unless there was a strong and coordinated response from the international community, national and local Somali authorities and humanitarian actors to meet the massive humanitarian needs. Since the start of this year, more than 220,000 Somalis had become internally displaced, including 137,000 due to conflict. Natural and climate-related disasters including drought and resulting lack of livelihoods and floods were additional complex and interlinked drivers of displacement. UNHCR believed the humanitarian situation would worsen as COVID-19 further spread. Most of the 2.6 million IDPs in Somalia lived in overcrowded settlements and many, especially those newly displaced, lived in makeshift shelters made of plastic bags, cardboards and sticks. Physical and social distancing was close to impossible, and there was scarcely enough clean water for drinking, let alone hand-washing. Conditions were ripe for widespread viral transmission.

A full briefing note is available here.

**COVID-19: Global appeal to address and counter COVID-19-related hate speech**

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that today, the Secretary-General had made an appeal to address and counter COVID-19 related hate speech. He said that the pandemic continued to “unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering”; he called for an all-out effort to end hate speech globally, as it was important to “act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate”.

Full statement available here.

**Other COVID-19 related updates**

Responding to questions, Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that scientific findings were pointing at the virus originating in and around Wuhan; there was no evidence suggesting that the virus had originated outside China. Looking at the origin of the virus would be of utmost importance to prevent additional waves of infection, and WHO would be happy to participate in investigations.

Replieding to a journalist’s question, Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said WFP had set up six regional hubs that served the needs of humanitarian workers, providing supplies and equipment. WFP also had dedicated medical facilities on the ground, including two air ambulances and two ground ambulances. What is more, hubs were being established in Accra and Addis Ababa. They should be up and running by mid-May.

**Syria – warning on escalating violence/killings across the country**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, had expressed serious concerns today, Friday, about continuing human rights violations and abuses and a sharp rise in killings of civilians across Syria, saying “the deteriorating situation is a ticking time-bomb that must not be ignored.” “We are receiving more reports every day of targeted killings and bombings from one end of the country to the other, with many such attacks taking place in populated areas. Various parties to the conflict in Syria, including ISIL, appear to view the global focus on the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to regroup and inflict violence on the population,” Bachelet said. In April, OHCHR had documented at least 35 civilian deaths due to attacks involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs), compared to seven the previous month.
Answering questions, Mr. Colville noted that there was a re-emergence of ISIL which had claimed responsibility for killings in the past days. ISIL was believed to have sleeper cells in various parts of the country. While there were allegations that Government forces were carrying out targeted assassinations, it was not always clear who was responsible for these crimes. In Idlib, the ceasefire seemed to be holding reasonably well, in general, even though there had been intermittent ground-based clashes.

**Migrants in the Mediterranean Sea**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said OHCHR was deeply concerned about recent reports of failure to assist and coordinated pushbacks of migrant boats in the central Mediterranean, which continued to be one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. Reports that Maltese authorities had requested commercial ships to push boats with migrants in distress back to the high seas were of particular concern. OHCHR was also concerned that humanitarian search and rescue vessels, which usually patrol the central Mediterranean area, were being prevented from supporting migrants in distress, at a time when the numbers attempting to make the perilous journey from Libya to Europe has increased sharply. Following the immobilization of the humanitarian rescue ships Alan Kurdi and Aita Mari, there were currently no active humanitarian search and rescue vessels in the central Mediterranean. It had also been alleged that administrative regulations and measures were being used to impede the work of humanitarian NGOs. OHCHR was calling for restrictions on the work of these rescuers to be lifted immediately. Such measures were clearly putting lives at risk.

Charley Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR was echoing the calls by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. No refugee or migrant should be returned to Libya after being rescued at sea. It was important to note the use of arbitrary detention of migrants and refugees was only one problematic aspect of the situation in Libya. Even if this issue was fixed tomorrow, the conditions in Libya still would not allow for a return of refugee and migrants. Libya could not be considered to have a safe port for disembarkation, for instance. States should not, therefore, delay or hesitate to respond to stress call and had to uphold their obligations under international law. Further, humanitarian efforts should be neither criminalized nor penalized.

**Surging violence uproots thousands of people in eastern Congo**

Charley Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR remained alarmed at an ongoing surge in violent attacks on local populations in the Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where more than 200,000 people had been forced to flee their homes in just two months. UNHCR also remained concerned at the shrinking space for humanitarian work as attacks continued to hamper its ability to reach those in dire need of assistance. UNHCR was calling on all sides involved in the conflict to respect civilian lives and humanitarian work. In Ituri province, UNHCR and its partners had recorded more than 3,000 serious human rights violations in Djugu Territory in the last 60 days, arising from almost 50 attacks against the local population on average every day. Displaced persons had reported acts of extreme violence with at least 274 civilians killed with weapons such as machetes. More than 140 women had been raped and almost 8,000 houses set on fire. Consistent with earlier patterns, the vast majority of those displaced were women and children, many of whom were now living under crowded circumstances with host families.

A full briefing note is available here.

**40th anniversary of the declaration of the eradication of smallpox**

Dr. Rosamund Lewis, Head of Smallpox Secretariat for the World Health Organization (WHO), said smallpox had been a terrible disease, which had killed hundreds of millions of people for the last 3,000 years. In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century alone, between 1900 and 1975, more than 300 million people died from it. This
mattered today, as the world was in the midst of a new pandemic. The eradication of smallpox had been possible thanks to an incredible global cooperation, including during the Cold War. The WHO had been asked to coordinate the response in 1967 and had successfully done so.

Answering journalists’ questions, Dr. Lewis said there were only two laboratories holding the virus, and they did so under very strict conditions. Further, WHO performed routine checks of these facilities, under the authority of the World Health Assembly. Many countries and WHO held a stockpile of vaccines for this virus, and a treatment for it had been developed. Today with COVID-19, like then with smallpox, WHO was fighting misinformation and disinformation as this was critical to achieve eradication. Dr. Lewis added that sequencing of the variola virus, which caused the smallpox, was strictly prohibited under rules established by the World Health Assembly. Additional treatments for smallpox were needed in case it reappeared. Should a resistance develop, it would be important ensure global access to alternative treatments.

**Update on World Health Assembly – WHA73**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said the World Health Assembly (WHA73) would open on Monday 18 May 2020 at 12 p.m. and would close no later than Tuesday 19 May. The provisional agenda was available online. It included a debate on COVID-19. The whole Assembly would be webcast live on WHO’s website.

Also on the World Health Assembly, Mr. Lindmeier said the date for the November session had yet to be determined. The COVID-19 situation allowing, the full assembly would be held later this year.

Responding to a question, Steven Solomon, Principal Legal Officer for Governing Bodies for the World Health Organization (WHO), explained that, as per the WHO’s Constitution, the World Health Assembly’s functions include inviting any organization on conditions prescribed by the same Assembly. However, in the case of national organizations, invitations shall be issued only with the consent of the Government concerned.

The Director-General, in his capacity as the chief technical and administrative officer of the Organization and the ex-officio Secretary of the Health Assembly, had the discretion to invite external observers. This discretion, however, had to comply with the rules outlined in the WHO Constitution and the policies adopted by the World Health Assembly.

It had to be noted that, according to Resolution 25.1 adopted in 1972, the World Health Assembly recognized the representative of the People’s Republic of China as the only representatives of China to the World Health Assembly and expelled the representatives of Taiwan.

**Announcement: new WIPO Director-General**

Edward Harris, for the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), said member states of WIPO on 8 May 2020, had appointed by consensus Daren Tang as the Organization's next Director General, with Mr. Tang's six-year term beginning on 1 October 2020. Mr. Tang’s appointment by the General Assembly, WIPO’s highest governing body, had followed his nomination by the WIPO Coordination Committee in March 2020. He would succeed Francis Gurry, who had served as WIPO's Director General since 1 October 2008.

A press release is available here.

**Geneva announcements**

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said extensive discussions were being held on how and when to re-open the Palais des Nations, including for press briefings. It should be noted that journalists could still had access their offices.
The United Nations Information Centres in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna were jointly organizing a virtual Ciné-ONU. Participants were invited to watch the documentary “Unseen Enemy”, using a link and password which had been sent by email, and then attend an online discussion, today at 3 p.m., with the movie’s director, Janet Tobias, as well as Dr. Sylvie Briand, Director of Global Infectious Hazard Preparedness at WHO and Todd Howland, Chief of Development, Economic and Social Issues at OHCHR.