The topics addressed were COVID-19, violence in Nigeria, situation in Ukraine, and a global seasonal climate update.

**COVID-19: socioeconomic impact on Middle East and North Africa**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that the WFP estimated that in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in addition to the previously food insecure people, about 6.7 million people could soon be struggling to feed themselves due to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. With the extra 6.7 million people, the estimated total number of food insecure people in the region would rise to 47.6 million people. With little to no savings, no unemployment insurance, and reduced food subsidies, people who engaged in subsistence or informal work to support their families could not endure sustained lockdowns.

Ms. Byrs stressed that it was vital that WFP maintain its food assistance to more than 23 million people in the MENA region at a time when the pandemic was threatening to push even more people into hunger.

After years of conflict, political instability and economic troubles, many countries in the MENA region were ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic and its impact. Most countries in the region were food-importing countries, which made them vulnerable to trade restrictions and border closures. Nearly 3.8 million children in 11 countries were no longer receiving WFP school meals following school closures across the region. Ms.
Byrs informed that the WFP was providing food assistance to more than 23 million people in the Middle East and North Africa, including 12 million people in hunger-stricken Yemen as well as more than four million people in Syria. Ms. Byrs also said that the pandemic had led to a sharp increase in the price of standard food baskets in Sudan, Syria and Yemen, among other places.

In 2020, the WFP needed USD 12 billion to feed some 100 million people around the world, said Ms. Byrs in a response to a question. Ms. Byrs explained that the food prices in the region were increasing because of several factors, including conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, a disrupted supply chain, currency devaluation and steady inflation.

Responding to another question, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that in 2019, the humanitarian response plan for Yemen had required USD 4.19 billion and received $3.06 billion in funding, or 86 percent. Of that, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been the largest donor providing USD 1 billion, or 28 per cent of received funding.

COVID19: questions and answers

Responding to questions, Dr. Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the outbreak in Africa was definitely on the rise. There were certain countries which had showed that early intervention, including testing and contact tracing, made a difference. The Americas were driving the pandemic at the moment; they were the current epicentre. Definite answers on what went wrong or right could not be provided before the crisis was over.

Dr. Harris said that the work to develop a vaccine was going on at a very fast rate, faster than ever in history, but coronaviruses were a tricky group of viruses, and caution was of order. Answering other questions, Dr. Harris said that for the time being, WHO briefings were planned to continue on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and the media would be informed of any changes; she emphasized, once again, the importance of testing; and she stressed that the World Health Assembly was an assembly of Member States, who were in charge of inviting participants to the event.

In a response to a further question, Dr. Harris said that one had to assume that the virus could be present on any surface that many people touched, as the virus could survive on surfaces from hours to days. That was why it was critical to frequently wash or disinfect hands. There was currently no treatment of which one could confidently say that it could stop and kill the virus. Countries around the world needed to continue implementing a comprehensive set of measures, including testing, contact tracing, isolation, and keeping an eye on the overall situation.

On the issue of after-crisis review, Dr. Harris said that such reviews were conducted after every significant outbreak. It was a very much independent process, including interviews with all those involved, and producing lessons learned. On masks, Dr. Harris said that face covering should primarily be used by sick people to protect others from themselves; medical masks should primarily be used to medical personnel. Dr. Harris said she would subsequently share the information on a temperature which was able of killing the virus in test labs.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service, added that a UN Policy Brief on “COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health” was expected to be launched by the UN Secretary-General on Wednesday, 13 May at 11 p.m. New York time (Thursday, 14 May at 5 a.m. Geneva time). The report had been discussed at today’s advanced press briefing by WHO; the content of the briefing, the brief and related content were under strict embargo until the time indicated above.

Situation in Ukraine

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that humanitarians were concerned that the contact line in Ukraine had remained closed since 21 March. No one, including humanitarian personnel, was currently able to cross the line, which normally saw 900,000 crossings per
month. This closure particularly affected the elderly people in the non-government controlled areas (NGCA) who depended on pensions and health care from the government-controlled areas. The closure limited ability to organize humanitarian convoys, and only two such convoys had crossed into Donetsk since the beginning of the crisis. Humanitarian agencies continued their operations on both sides of the contact line, helping some two million people in the region, and should be able to cover the needs until the end of May.

Answering to questions, Mr. Laerke said that the lock downs mainly impacted elderly people in the NGCA, who could not access normal services and collect their pensions. Across Ukraine there were close to 16,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases; for the two non-government controlled areas in the east, figures received from health authorities spoke of 232 cases in Luhansk NGCA, and of 184 cases in Donetsk NGCA.

Violence in Nigeria

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that ongoing violence in parts of north-western Nigeria forced an estimated 23,000 people to seek safety and security in Niger last month. That took the total number of refugees fleeing that part of Nigeria to take sanctuary in neighbouring Niger to more than 60,000 since the first influx, in April 2019. Since April 2019, people had fled relentless attacks by armed groups in the Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina states of Nigeria. Most had found refuge in Niger’s Maradi region Fearing and fleeing the same insecurity in the border areas, an additional 19,000 Niger nationals had become displaced inside their own country.

UNHCR was concerned about deteriorating security inside Nigeria and the risk of armed incursions spilling over into Niger. The latest influx of refugees, mainly desperate women and children, followed attacks in Nigeria’s Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states during the month of April. UNHCR had been present at the onset, and the emergency response focused on protection and life-saving activities, including registration, protection and border monitoring, education, health, shelter as well as water and sanitation. The violence was not directly linked to armed groups operating in the Lake Chad and in the Sahel, explained Mr. Baloch.

The full press statement can be found here.

Global seasonal climate update

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that the WMO had issued a new global seasonal climate update for May, June and July. Warmer-than-average temperatures were expected on land because of the warmer-than-average sea temperatures. Both the El Niño Southern Oscillation and Indian Ocean Dipole had been in a neutral phase during January-February-March 2020. April 2020 in Europe tied as the warmest April on record with April 2016, but in 2016 there had been a strong El Niño, stressed Ms. Nullis. The update was in the preoperational phase at the moment, it was not a forecast, but was meant to provide guidance to the governments.

Responding to a series of questions, Ms. Nullis said that the deforestation in the Amazon and other parts of the world was concerning and formed part of a much bigger picture. We were going to see more extreme weather, some of which was due to natural variability, but most of it was related to the climate change. The Atlantic hurricane season was coming up. Strong multi-hazard early warning systems were very much needed. It was not yet possible to say whether the climate change would make El Niño phenomena more frequent.

Full press release can be read here.

Geneva announcements

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed about a new report entitled How Covid-19 is changing the world: a statistical perspective, which would be published on 13 May at 11 am Geneva time, by 36 international agencies which had replied positively to the call made by UNCTAD to compile important stats on the impact of COVID-19 in their respective fields of
work. Those organizations included, among others: WTO, UNICEF, OCHA, UNHCR, IOM, but also the UN World Tourism Organization, OECD, WHO, European Central Bank, World Bank and the IMF. The purpose of the report was to put facts and figures on the table of policy makers.

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), informed about an ILO virtual press conference on 14 May at 2 p.m. Geneva time on how gaps in social protection threatened COVID-19 recovery in developing countries. This new brief on the role of social protection in addressing the consequences of the COVID19 crisis would propose a number of measures both in short and long term, once the crisis is over. Shahrashoub Razavi, Director of ILO Social Protection Department, and experts from the region would be available to answer questions.