UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: COVID-19 Cox’s Bazar - UNHCR - WFP - IOM

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Shotlist

1. Wide shot: exterior, main entrance to UN Geneva, seen from above.
2. SOUNDbite (EN) – Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR): “According to the Government of Bangladesh, one Rohingya refugee has tested positive for COVID-19 in the Kutapalong refugee settlement in Bangladesh. In addition, one member of the local Bangladeshi host community has also tested positive. Both had approached health facilities run by humanitarian partners, where samples were taken.”
4. SOUNDbite (EN) - SOUNDbite (EN) – Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR): “There are serious concerns about the potentially severe impact of the virus in a densely populated refugee settlement sheltering some 860,000 Rohingya refugees. Another 400,000 Bangladeshis live in the surrounding host communities. These populations are considered to be among the most at risk globally in this pandemic.”
6. SOUNDbite (EN) Elisabeth Byrs, Senior Spokesperson, World Food Programme (WFP): “Lockdowns and restrictions in movement are affecting livelihoods of millions across Bangladesh, especially daily wage earners like rickshaw drivers, day labourers who now find themselves unable to meet their basic needs.”
8. SOUNDBITE (EN) Paul Dillon, Spokesperson, International Organization for Migration (IOM): “IOM is preparing 250 Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Isolation and Treatment Centres beds which will come on-line shortly. We’ve integrated, we have rather upgraded triage areas in the 35 primary care facilities we support, along with three isolation and treatment centres and a 93-unit contact-tracing quarantine centre, large enough to accommodate 465 people is nearing completion.”

UN agencies step up support for Rohingya camp complex, host communities as first case of COVID-19 infection is confirmed

Following confirmation that the first cases of COVID-19 infection have been identified in an overcrowded refugee camp in Bangladesh, UN humanitarians on Friday announced additional measures and appealed for funds to prevent the spread of the disease.

Speaking via videoconference, UN refugee agency (UNHCR) spokesperson Andrej Mahecic relayed Government confirmation that “one Rohingya refugee has tested positive for COVID-19 in the Kutapalong refugee settlement in Bangladesh”, in reference to a megacamp that is home to many hundreds of thousands of people who fled neighbouring Myanmar in 2017.

The UNHCR official continued: “In addition, one member of the local Bangladeshi host community has also tested positive. Both had approached health facilities run by humanitarian partners, where samples were taken.”

A series of concerted COVID-19 contingency measures have already been put in place in recent months by several UN agencies, but further international support is needed to assist the many vulnerable people in and around Cox’s Bazar.

“IOM is preparing 250 Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Isolation and Treatment Centres beds which will come on-line shortly,” said Paul Dillon, spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Upgraded triage areas have been provided in the 35 primary care facilities that the UN agency supports, “along with three isolation and treatment centres and a 93-unit contact-tracing quarantine centre, large enough to accommodate 465 people is nearing completion”, Mr. Dillon added.

The development adds further pressure on extremely vulnerable individuals preparing for the approaching monsoon season.

Last year, 16,000 people were affected in a single 24-hour period during one of the heaviest downpours.

Among the UN agencies helping to bolster camp residents, the World Food Programme (WFP) is clearing drains and stabilising slopes that have the potential to slip in heavy rain.

Most of those in the Bangladesh camp complex fled extreme violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state in August 2017, an exodus previously described as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein.

“There are serious concerns about the potentially severe impact of the virus in a densely populated refugee settlement sheltering some 860,000 Rohingya refugees,” said UNHCR’s Mr. Mahecic. “Another 400,000 Bangladeshis live in the surrounding host communities. These populations are considered to be among the most at risk globally in this pandemic.”

After warning that COVID-19 threatened to reverse development gains made by Bangladesh in the last 50 years, WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs said that $320 million was needed urgently to help the most vulnerable.

Some $200 million of this funding is required for the agency’s COVID-19 response in Bangladesh and the remaining $120 million is needed to help the mainly Muslim ethnic Rohingya for the next six months, Ms. Byrs added.

“Lockdowns and restrictions in movement are affecting livelihoods of millions across Bangladesh, especially daily wage earners like rickshaw drivers, day labourers who now find themselves unable to meet
their basic needs,” she said.

Under WFP’s scheme, the funding will ensure food security for families in rural areas and urban slums, as well as day labourers.

In the meantime, the agency has maintained national distributions of fortified rice, cash transfers and nutrition programmes, to complement Government assistance.

It has also begun building storage areas for food and non-food items necessary for the COVID-19 response, including personal protective equipment, and is helping other humanitarian agencies by moving supplies into and around Bangladesh.