Situation in Syria

Geir O. Pedersen, Special Envoy for Syria, said that the key message of his statement to the Security Council the previous day was to use all existing opportunities to promote a lasting ceasefire and combat COVID-19. Mr. Pedersen was continuing to work on a political track and the Constitutional Committee. The Special Envoy and Khawla Matar, his deputy in Damascus, were in regular touch with both Syrian and international actors. The OSE was very carefully following the situation on the ground. There was a relative calm in Idlib, with the ceasefire largely holding since the beginning of March. A continuation of hostilities would have devastating consequences, particularly in the context of further spread of COVID-19. The official COVID-19 case count in Syria was very low and stood at only 64, but there was a fear that the real numbers were much higher. There was hence no place for complacency.

Mr. Pedersen continued to appeal for a release of abductees and detainees, which could be done both unilaterally and in a negotiated manner. An unimpeded humanitarian access was also essential in order to deliver much needed assistance. The economic conditions in Syria were dramatically deteriorating; recent price increases and dearth of commodities were particularly worrying. Regular Syrians held huge uncertainty on what the future held.

Mr. Pedersen said that the two co-chairs of the Constitutional Committee had agreed on the agenda and were ready to meet in Geneva as soon as the conditions allowed. The Committee itself could not solve the conflict
but could be an important confidence-building mechanism and open the doors of a broader political process. United States and Russia had a key role to play, stressed Mr. Pedersen. He further said that in the past many opportunities for peace had been missed, and that all efforts should be made to avoid the same mistakes in the future.

The Special Envoy’s briefing to the Security Council on 18 May can be read here.

Responding to journalists’ questions, Mr. Pedersen said that what he needed from the parties was a real commitment before the third session of the Small Body of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva. The goal would be to have real, substantive discussions in Geneva and not waste time. The Special Envoy’s mandate was to work with both the Government of Syria and the opposition, he said. There was a need to rebuild trust and confidence between these parties to the conflict, as well as between the United States and Russia, who had shown in the past that they could cooperate on Syria. Possibilities of a virtual session of the Constitutional Committee had also been discussed but, as of today, that seemed unlikely.

COVID-19: indigenous refugees in South America

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that, as the coronavirus pandemic spread through Latin America, the UNHCR was warning that many displaced indigenous communities were now dangerously exposed and at risk. There were almost 5,000 indigenous Venezuelans displaced in Brazil, mainly from the Warao ethnic group, but also from the Eñapa, Kariña, Pemon and Ye’kwana communities. Many lived in isolated or remote areas, where they lacked access to health services, clean water and soap. Others lived in cramped dwellings or in informal urban settlements without access to protective equipment. Most of the border indigenous groups were threatened by physical and cultural extinction because of insufficient food and severe malnutrition that could increase the risk of contagion.

National lockdowns had also ground to a halt many of their livelihood activities, such as farming, the selling of produce and handicraft production. Education was also a challenge as isolated and impoverished indigenous students and teachers had no means of learning remotely and pursuing virtual education during the lockdown. Since March, the UNHCR had been working with national governments to ensure COVID-19 prevention measures and assistance reach remote areas where those groups had found safety. Ahead of an international donor conference for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America, hosted by the European Union and Spain on 26 May, the UNHCR was calling on countries to pledge support. Alarmingly, the Regional Response Plan for refugees and migrants from Venezuela, worth USD 1.41 billion, was currently just four per cent funded.

Full UNHCR press release can be read here.

COVID-19: food insecurity in southern Africa

Elizabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that, with COVID-19 set to significantly aggravate already widespread food insecurity across southern Africa, the WFP was ramping up operations to try to ensure the needs of the most at-risk could be met.

WFP analysis indicated that some 42 million people could need food assistance this year in the 12 southern African countries where it operated; 26 million of them were living in rural areas already food insecure due to drought, flooding, conflict or economic crisis; and 16 million were impacted by COVID-19. While the imminent harvest should ease hunger in rural areas, lockdowns and other restrictions might impede the access of smallholder farmers to markets. With the pandemic not projected to peak in southern Africa until July to September, national governments were already struggling to respond to growing food assistance needs, burdened by heavy debts and fiscal deficits, depreciating currencies and insufficient social investment.

Ms. Byrs added that the WFP was establishing a regional staging centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, for aid cargo and personnel. WFP’s unmet funding requirements for the region through October, including anticipated additional food assistance needs generated by the virus, stood at USD 797 million. The shortfalls
for the three biggest operations – Zimbabwe, DRC and Mozambique – amounted to USD 690 million.

**COVID-19: greening the transport sector**

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), referred to a report co-published by the UNECE and the International Labour Organization (ILO), with the support of the Partnership on Jobs in Green and Healthy Transport of the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme. The report argued that investment in transforming the transport sector could create millions of new jobs and help countries move to greener, healthier economies, says new report. The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic could not be a return to business as usual; instead, it had to be used as an opportunity to push the advancement of the sustainable development agenda.

The report examined the employment implications of four “green transport” scenarios in 56 countries in North America, Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, which are members of the UNECE. The study found that 10 million additional jobs could be created worldwide - 2.9 million in the UNECE region - if 50 per cent of all vehicles manufactured were electric. In addition, almost 5 million new jobs could be created worldwide, - 2.5 million in the UNECE region - if UNECE countries doubled investment in public transport. The shift to greener economies would mean some job redistribution, but the report estimates that there would be a net gain in employment.

Full report is available [here](#).

**Tropical cyclone Amphan**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), informed that the tropical cyclone Amphan had intensified rapidly in the Bay of Bengal to become a “Super Cyclonic Storm” – the top-level category in that part of the world. It was expected to make landfall on 20 May as an extremely severe cyclonic storm/category 3, bringing dangerous winds, storm surge and flooding to coastal areas of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. The Indian Meteorological Department in New Delhi warned of a storm surge of about 4-5 meters above astronomical tide, which was likely to inundate low-lying areas of West Bengal during landfall, and of about 2.5-3.5 meters for Bangladesh. Amphan would make landfall with maximum sustained wind speed of 155-165 km/hour, gusting to 180 km/hour.

Full WMO press release on cyclone Amphan can be read [here](#).

Denis Mc Clean, for the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), recalled that 50 years before, according to official government figures, one million people had died in Cyclone Bhola, in November 1970. Since then there had been a huge drop in fatalities from cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. Both India and Bangladesh were pursuing a zero-casualty policy, and preparations had been made to evacuate three million people before the arrival of cyclone Amphan on Wednesday evening in the border region between India and Bangladesh. A key concern was to identify additional buildings suitable for short-term evacuations to reduce over-crowding and to maintain as much social distance as possible.

In Bangladesh, the number of shelters had been doubled to 12,000. The 34 Rohingya camps with 900,000 people were of particular concern. They were safe from tidal surge but could be badly impacted by landslides and flash floods depending on how heavy the rains were.

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), added that approximately 1.2 million refugee and host community members in the Cox Bazaar area were facing a serious threat from the upcoming cyclone. If people needed to seek communal shelter, they would be at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19. According to government officials, as of 18 May, five cases had been confirmed among the refugee population of the Cox Bazaar. Mr. Dillon also said that the IOM teams were using what they had learned responding to Cyclone Bulbul in November 2019 to prepare for the new cyclone season, training first responders on early warning mechanisms and response activities, distributing and
prepositioning supplies, renovating community cyclone shelters, reinforcing critical infrastructure, repairing drainage systems, enhancing individual shelter durability and raising awareness throughout the community.

**Wet season across east Africa**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that the period from June to September was an important season for Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Uganda. A wetter than usual season was forecasted for western and central Sudan, southwestern Ethiopia, southeastern South Sudan, western Kenya, eastern and central Uganda. The rest of the region was expected to receive the usual rainfall, except for a limited coastal area of Somalia, where less than usual rain was expected. Considering the ongoing simultaneous emergencies affecting the region, including floods, the desert locust invasion and the COVID-19 pandemic, regional and national authorities were encouraged to use this seasonal forecast to adjust contingency plans, and to update them with ten days and monthly forecasts provided by National Meteorological Services and by the Climate Prediction and Applications Centre of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (ICPAC).

**World Health Assembly**

Fadéla Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the WHA would continue at noon today with Member States’ statements, to be followed by discussion and adoption of a resolution on COVID-19. Four or five Heads of State were expected to join the closing of the World Health Assembly around 2 p.m. today. A closing statement would be delivered by Dr. Tedros.

Responding to questions, Ms. Chaib stated that the focus today was on finalizing the agenda and successfully completing the session. Ms. Chaib reminded that the previous day, more than 100 countries had taken the floor and spoken about their respective COVID-19 responses so she would not comment on any specific country’s speech. Ms. Chaib explained that leaders from around the world had been invited to speak at the WHA, but not all of them had accepted the invitation.

The seventy-third World Health Assembly could be watched live here: [who.int](who.int).

**Announcements**

Monica Gehner, for the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), said that on average, prices for mobile-voice, mobile-data and fixed-broadband services were decreasing steadily around the world, and in some countries even dramatically. The reduction in price relative to income was even more dramatic, suggesting that, globally, telecommunication and information and communication technology services were becoming more affordable. However, both trends did not translate into rapidly increasing Internet penetration rates which suggested that there were other barriers to Internet use. Her colleague Martin Schaaper, Senior Analyst on Information and Communication Technology with ITU, was available for interviews on this matter.


Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), informed that on 20 May, the UNDP’s Human Development Report (HDR) Office would be releasing a new report on the impact of COVID-19 on human development. The headline of the report was that the COVID-19 impact had led to a decrease on the accrued human development for the first time since 1990. The report was under embargo until 8 a.m. on 20 May. A briefing by the HDR Director might be held on 20 May at 5 pm Geneva time, which was yet to be confirmed. [Later on, it was announced that the briefing would take place on Wednesday, 20 May at 1 pm Geneva time. An invitation had been sent out to correspondents.]

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, would speak to the media on 22 May at 9:30 a.m., just ahead of the regular press briefing.