UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 22 May 2020

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Story

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the virtual briefing, which was attended by the spokespersons for the World Food Programme, the United Nations Refugee Agency, the World Health Organization, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the International Labour Organization, and the World Meteorological Organization.

The topics addressed were the cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh, the Atlantic hurricane season, and COVID-19.

Cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said cyclone Amphan, which had made landfall yesterday between India and Bangladesh, had impacted some 10 million people in Bangladesh, according to preliminary reports. At least 72 people had been killed in India and 25 had been killed in Bangladesh. Half a million families may have lost their homes. The storm had come with strong winds and heavy rain that also damaged crops. Power supply had been cut off to cities and towns, many of which are working to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. There were more than 26,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Bangladesh and nearly 400 deaths. The Bangladesh government evacuated 2 million people before the storm hit and more than 12,000 cyclone shelters had been set up with COVID-19 prevention equipment, including masks, sanitizers, soap and handwashing facilities. About one million people had also been evacuated in India. Salt water intrusion was also expected to have a severe impact on livelihoods for the next
2-3 years. Humanitarian partners and government authorities were conducting joint assessments of the damage. It was expected that needs would be mainly emergency shelter assistance, water sanitation and hygiene and livelihood support.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that a WFP team was conducting a Rapid Needs Assessment. While most crops had been harvested already, early reports suggest that there was damage to fisheries, particularly smallholder shrimp farmers. WFP had prepositioned food stocks, including high energy biscuits for 90,000 families, in affected areas and extra food stocks could also be made available and ready for distribution, if needed. The Rohingya camps had been largely spared from damage when Cyclone Amphan made landfall in Bangladesh and India on 20 May, however a direct hit from a cyclone had the potential to be devastating. WFP was providing extra food assistance to households impacted by the storms associated with the cyclone as well as continuing critical monsoon and cyclone season preparations and maintenance in the refugee camps. These works include clearing drains and stabilising slopes that had the potential to cause landslides during heavy rains.

Charlie Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that in Cox’s Bazar 118 shelters had been destroyed and 1,423 had been damaged, affecting just over 7,000 Rohingyas refugees in the settlement. Of that number, 555 had been moved to temporary shelters or were staying with relatives while their homes were repaired. Important work had been done ahead of the cyclone that had mitigated much of its damaging effects. A great deal of credit must go to the refugee volunteers who had been given training beforehand and carried out much of the protection work.

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (UNHCR), said the disaster mobilization for cyclone Amphan had been a textbook example of how it should be done. The forecast provided by the Indian Meteorological Department, which served as WMO’s regional specialized meteorological centre and provided forecast for the entire basin, had been spot on. The information that it provided had been the basis for the massive evacuation and the community response.

Above average Atlantic hurricane season is predicted

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (UNHCR), said an above-normal 2020 Atlantic hurricane season was expected, according to forecasters with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Prediction Center, a division of the National Weather Service. The outlook predicted a 60 per cent chance of an above-normal season, a 30 per cent chance of a near-normal season, and only a 10 per cent chance of a below-normal season. The Atlantic hurricane season ran from June 1 through November 30. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Prediction Center was forecasting a likely range of 13 to 19 named storms, of which 6 to 10 could become hurricanes, with winds of 119 km/h (74 mph) or higher, including 3 to 6 major hurricanes, that is category 3, 4 or 5 hurricanes, with winds of 178 km/h (111 mph) or higher. An average hurricane season produces 12 named storms, of which 6 becomes hurricanes, including 3 major hurricanes.

COVID-19 in Yemen

Responding to questions, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that in Yemen, aid agencies were scaling up logistics and supply capacity and some 125 metric tons of supplies had arrived, while over 6,600 metric tons of tests, personal protective equipment and ICU supplies were in the pipeline. However, more was urgently needed, especially oxygen and personal protective equipment. Preserving large-scale existing aid programmes in health, water and sanitation, nutrition and other sectors also offers an essential defense against infection for millions of people. With acute shortages in PPEs for health workers and no regular salary payments, the health system was collapsing. More than 30 key UN programmes risked closing in the coming weeks due to lack of funding. COVID Rapid Response Teams, for example, were funded only for the next six weeks. Funding the entire aid operation in Yemen was more urgent than ever, with up to $2 billion required until the end of the year. The UN and Saudi Arabia would co-host a virtual pledging event on 2 June to support fund raising. OCHA was asking donors to pledge
generously and pay pledges promptly. Aid agencies were approaching a fiscal cliff, and without addition funding, Yemen would be left to fight a COVID-19 pandemic with a collapsed health system.

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), quoted the Spokesperson of the UN Secretary-General who had said yesterday that COVID-19 was making the humanitarian crisis in Yemen much worse, which was already the world’s largest. Epidemiologists estimated that the virus could spread faster, more widely and with deadlier consequences in Yemen than in many other countries. Tests remained in short supply.

A journalist asked why it had been decided to hold the upcoming pledging conference in Saudi Arabia, whose responsibility in the conflict there was ascertained by the UN. Mr. Laerke replied that Saudi Arabia had been the largest humanitarian donor to the UN response plan in Yemen last year and the year before. It had given large amounts of money, no strings attached, early in the year. Thanks, in part, to their contribution, a looming famine had been beat back, a cholera epidemic had been brought under control and the largest humanitarian operations in the world had been established in Yemen. Over the years, OCHA and the United Nations had emphasized the need for all parties to the conflict, including Saudi Arabia, to adhere to international humanitarian law which prohibits targeting any forms of health facilities and required that civilians and civilian facilities be protected from fighting.

Mr. Laerke added that, on record, $677 million in humanitarian funding had been received this year as compared to $4 billion last year. Donors often disbursed late in the year, but this year OCHA was asking them to do it earlier.

**Announcement: Launch of the ‘4th ILO Monitor on COVID-19**

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), said the ILO would be launching its fourth update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global employment and labour markets on Wednesday, 27 May. This new report would include updated estimates on the number of working hours and equivalent jobs that would be lost due to the pandemic and the devastating effect the crisis was having on youth employment, as well as other major issues. There would be an embargoed virtual press conference with ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder at 11.30 Geneva time on the 27 May. The Director of the Employment Policy Department, Sangheon Lee, would also be speaking. The embargo would lift at 14.00 Geneva time on 27 May.

**Announcement: WHO Executive Board Meeting**

Fadela Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the Executive Board of WHO was scheduled to meet today from noon to 3 p.m. today, but the meeting could be shorter. It was an abridged session and it would be webcast. As per usual procedure, this meeting followed the World Health Assembly. The Executive Board meeting would deal with procedural and managerial issues. It would resume the meeting later in the year when more substantive and technical issues would be discussed.

Responding to questions, Ms. Chaib said one of the items on the agenda of the Executive Board was a review of the discussions and debates that had taken place during the World Health Assembly, including the adoption of an historic resolution on COVID-19. The Board would also agree on dates for World Health Assembly and Board meetings due to take place in 2021. Technical issues would likely not be broached during the Board meeting.

**Announcement: International Day for Biological Diversity**

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that, in a message released for the International Day for Biological Diversity, the United Nations Secretary-General had said that “our solutions are in nature.” Preserving and sustainably managing biodiversity was necessary for mitigating climate disruption, guaranteeing water and food security and even preventing pandemics. As the world sought to build back better from the current crisis, it was important to work together to preserve
biodiversity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. That was how we would protect health and well-being for generations to come. The message had been distributed to the journalists.

On the occasion of the International Day for Biological Diversity, a joint FAO-UNEP press briefing on the “State of World’s Forests Report 2020: Forests, Biodiversity and People” was being held virtually today at 3 pm. The 2020 report and all related material had been under strict embargo until today 10 a.m. Rome time. Speakers in the briefing would be Mette Wilkie, the Director of Forestry Policy and Resources Division at the Forestry Department of the FAO, and Neville Ash the Director of the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre.