UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 26 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 World Meteorological Organization, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Refugee Agency.

The topics addressed were: COVID-19 and the situation in Yemen.

COVID-19 and urban refugees in East, Horn and Great Lakes of Africa

Charlie Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that refugees in urban areas across the East, Horn and Great Lakes region of Africa were struggling to meet their most basic needs as the economic impact of COVID19 began to take hold. UNHCR was working closely with governments and partners to find solutions for urban refugees in those challenging times. However, UNHCR feared that without further support, many urban refugees would become extremely vulnerable to exploitation, risk falling into significant levels of debt and might be forced into desperate situations to survive, such as transactional sex or child labour. Urban refugees were also facing job losses as businesses were forced to downsize or close due to COVID-19 restrictions. Many were daily wage workers or worked in the informal economy and were already living hand-to-mouth before the pandemic struck. For example, in Rwanda, most of the 12,000 urban refugees had seen the family wage earners lose their jobs; many had been working for businesses that have closed or are struggling to import commodities due to border restrictions.
Many urban refugees were also living in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, said Mr. Yaxley, and were thus particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus, as in Kenya where thousands of refugees were living in impoverished neighbourhoods in Nairobi with little access to clean water, making it nearly impossible to practice regular hand washing.

UNHCR press release can be read here.

Responding to questions, Mr. Yaxley said that there were hundreds of thousands of urban refugees across the region, maybe even more. In some places, restrictions were looser than in others. UNHCR recommended that refugees be included in government-response plans to COVID-19, and some governments had done so. Still, the capacities were limited and the governments across the region needed support. Food prices were rising in the region, said Mr. Yaxley.

**COVID-19 and the upcoming heat season**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), informed that parts of India were experiencing a heatwave, with temperatures above 45°C on Monday. Churu in Rajasthan had recorded 47.5°C, and several other stations were also above 45°C. The Indian Meteorological Department said that the high temperatures would continue until 28 May and then fall as a result of rain and storms.

The ongoing pandemic amplified the health risks of hot weather for many people, including those also at risk of COVID-19. Common actions to reduce heat-related illness and death - such as leaving dangerously hot homes for cooler air-conditioned public spaces, home visits to check on vulnerable people, and receiving urgent medical attention for signs of heat stroke - might be impossible or in contradiction to public health recommendations to reduce the transmission of COVID-19.

Ms. Nullis further informed that the Global Heat Health Information Network had put together an information series to help decision-makers manage the health risks of hot weather during COVID-19. The information series featured a technical brief on protecting health from hot weather during the COVID-19 pandemic, questions and answers on key issues, and planning checklists. More information can be found here.

**Situation in Yemen**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), stressed that the humanitarian situation in Yemen could spin out of control as COVID-19 threatened a population already weakened by years of conflict. Millions of Yemenis were hanging by a thread and were acutely vulnerable to shocks. Over 20 million Yemenis were food insecure, of which nearly 10 million were acutely food insecure. WFP expected the coronavirus to push many more children in Yemen into acute malnutrition. Over 2 million children in Yemen were already acutely malnourished.

WFP needed USD 878 million to continue to deliver life-saving assistance to millions in Yemen in need of humanitarian assistance to survive. Over five years of conflict had destroyed livelihoods, brought the health system to its knees and pushed millions to the brink of famine. Now COVID-19 posed a new threat to those vulnerable families. It was a huge logistical operation to get assistance to nearly half the population of war-torn Yemen, emphasized Ms. Byrs. WFP’s best response to COVID-19 was to continue current operations, which currently supported over one-third of the population with emergency food assistance.

Charlie Yaxley, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), added that Yemen remained the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, where as many as 80 percent of the population needed humanitarian assistance. A potential breaking point was being reached in UNHCR’s programmes, including its cash assistance programme, which might need to stop. UNHCR urged the international humanitarian community to provide the necessary support without delay.
Responding to a question, Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service (UNIS), reiterated that the working conditions for UN humanitarian staff in Yemen were very difficult. She referred to recent calls by the UN Secretary-General and the UN Special Envoy for Yemen for an immediate ceasefire in the country.

Geneva announcements

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), reminded that the ILO would be launching its fourth update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global employment and labour markets. A briefing with ILO Director-General Guy Ryder and Sangheon Lee, Director of the Employment Policy Department, would take place on 27 May at 11:30 am. The new report focused on the devastating effect the crisis was having on youth employment and also on young people’s education and training. The embargo was in place until 2 p.m. Geneva time on 27 May.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that today, 26 May at 3 p.m., there would be a press conference by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) on the occasion of the launch of a new WIPO online business service to help creators and innovators safeguard their valuable intellectual assets. The speaker would be Francis Gurry, WIPO Director-General. The information was under embargo until Wednesday, 27 May 2020 at 9 a.m. Geneva time.

Responding to other questions, Ms. Vellucci explained that it was still difficult to estimate financial gains or losses from the COVID-19 related telecommuting at UN Geneva. Another, non-related issue was the current liquidity crisis at the UN Secretariat, caused by the late payments of assessed contributions by Member States, which had led to a temporary freeze in hiring, among other measures.