UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 29 May 2020

29-05-2020 | Press Conferences

Story

**COVID-19: High-level event on financing solutions and other matters**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), reminded that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, and the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Andrew Holness, had convened world leaders and international organizations yesterday in a joint initiative to sharpen and accelerate the global response to the significant economic and human impacts of COVID-19. They had launched a collaborative effort to enable discussions on concrete proposals to overcome challenges in six areas, including the need to expand liquidity in the global economy and maintain financial stability to safeguard development gains; the need to address debt vulnerabilities for all developing countries to save lives and livelihoods for billions of people around the world; and the need to create a space in which private sector creditors can proactively engage in effective and timely solutions.

A press release is available [here](https://www.un.org/).  

Responding to questions, Tarik Jašarević, for the World Health Organization (WHO), explained that the study published in The Lancet and other factors had prompted the Executive Group to implement a temporary pause of the hydroxychloroquine arm within the Solidarity Trial while the safety data was being reviewed. A final decision on the harm, benefit or lack of benefit of hydroxychloroquine would be made once the evidence had been reviewed by the Data Safety Monitoring Board. This review
would include data from the Solidarity Trial and other ongoing trials, as well as any evidence published so far. It was expected by mid-June.

Solidarity, sharing of knowledge and open science were necessary to ramp up production of vaccines to the benefit of everyone everywhere, Mr. Jašarević added.

**COVID-19: Caste-based killings in Nepal**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said there had been a shocking killing of five men by opponents of an inter-caste relationship in Nepal last weekend, as well as several other incidents of caste-based discrimination and violence that had taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Caste-based discrimination remained widespread not only in Nepal but other countries, too, and often led to serious harm and, as in this case, even loss of life. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, had noted that ending caste-based discrimination was fundamental to the sustainable development vision of leaving no one behind, and had called for an independent investigation into the attacks. She had stressed that the victims and their families had the right to justice, truth and reparations. Dalits were seen to be on the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy in Nepali society, traditionally discriminated against as “untouchables”. Since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, Dalit activists and journalists had reported several cases of caste-based discrimination, incidents of rape, assault, denial of funeral rites and discrimination at quarantine sites.

A press release is available [here](#).

Responding to a question about Hong Kong, Mr. Colville said OHCHR had taken note of the decision taken yesterday by the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China regarding a national security law for Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. OHCHR would review this decision in light of its potential impact on the human rights and freedoms of the people of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. In the meantime, OHCHR was calling on the authorities to ensure peaceful protesters can exercise their right to freedom of expression and assemble safely in the coming days, as the situation may become increasingly tense and polarised.

A journalist asked a question on Twitter and President Donald Trump. Mr. Colville responded that OHCHR had repeatedly called for further action to address the many ways in which social media platforms had contributed to human rights violations, including through hate speech, incitement to violence and misinformation that undermines fundamental rights. Efforts by social media companies to better ensure their platforms address these concerns were welcome. There were no simple fixes in this arena, however. Overbroad regulation could stifle free expression and be used to target human rights defenders. The digital environment had never been more essential to our daily lives than today, and these issues deserved thoughtful consideration and effective responses.

**COVID-19: Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), stressed the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 could push an additional 10 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean into severe food insecurity this year, an estimate for the countries and subregions where WFP had a presence. Quick and decisive action was needed to prevent this crisis from becoming a hunger pandemic. The number of people who suffered from severe food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean could rise from 3.4 million in 2019 to about 14 million in 2020, demanding urgent attention from the global community. COVID-19 worsened a regional situation where economic shocks, erratic climate, displacement and insecurity had already taken a heavy toll. The pandemic had the potential to push even more people into poverty and hunger.

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that as Latin America emerged as the new epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR had warned of worsening conditions for displaced Venezuelans in the southern region of the continent as winter approached. In addition to health risks,
COVID-related lockdowns and confinement measures had already resulted in severe hardship for Venezuelan refugee and migrants. Many had now lost their livelihoods and were faced with poverty, destitution, eviction, widespread hunger and food insecurity as well as increased protection risks. As national capacities were stretched to breaking point, access to public health services and timely medical care was also a challenge, especially for those in an irregular situation. UNHCR was worried that their plight could now worsen with the onset of winter as temperatures drop in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, which together hosted more than 1.5 million Venezuelans.

A briefing note is available here.

Responding to questions, Safa Msehli for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), deplored the killing of 30 migrants in a shooting involving a trafficker in Libya. This was a bleak reminder of the horrors migrants had to endure at the hands of smugglers and traffickers in Libya. As conflict continued unabated in the capital and surrounding areas, conditions for civilians, especially migrants and displaced persons were quickly deteriorating.

**Situation in Yemen**

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), stressed that the United Nations relief agencies and NGO partners in Yemen were seeking $2.4 billion for the next seven months (June to December) to sustain a humanitarian lifeline for 19 million people devastated by over five years of conflict, displacement, malnutrition, disease and a weak health system buckling under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. To help fund-raising for the response in Yemen, a virtual pledging conference would take place on 2 June co-hosted by the United Nations and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. If funded, more than 200 organizations - working in a coordinated fashion through a common strategy - would be able to continue to deliver food, nutrition, health care and support to 3.6 million displaced people and provide other critical activities for vulnerable communities across the country. If not funded, the spectre of famine would return, COVID-19 and other killer diseases such as cholera, dengue and malaria would ravage the country, and more people would die. A media advisory for the pledging event 2 June had been sent yesterday.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said the international community had provided an unprecedented level of support for Yemen over the last 5 years. WFP called on the authorities to work with it to ensure that the necessary resources could be mobilized to sustain life-saving assistance and stop COVID-19 from devastating Yemen. WFP in Yemen was focusing its efforts on mobilizing the resources it needs to sustain assistance to the most food insecure people in Yemen. WFP needed 200 million US$ a month for its programmes and was doing everything possible to make sure no child or mother was left behind, as COVID-19 poses yet another threat to Yemen’s children. Yemen’s fragile health system was already on the brink of collapse. A further deterioration may leave malnourished children and mothers unable to access the nutrition support they need.

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR was urgently seeking USD 89.4 million to keep lifesaving aid programmes running. Without these funds, UNHCR would have to reduce and cut programmes, which would severely impact nearly one million refugees and internally displaced people. Some of these consequences would mean 282,000 refugees and asylum-seekers would no longer have access to basic services such as education, health, food, water, sanitation and hygiene and shelter, or protection services including registration, documentation and specialized services for children. At least 360,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) would not have access to adequate services - shelter, hygiene and WASH, increasing their risks of contracting communicable diseases. Some 655,000 IDPs would not receive basic shelter for themselves and their families in the early days of displacement, heightening the risk of violence against women and children and the reliance on harmful coping mechanisms.

Responding to questions, Mr. Laerke said that, should enough funds not be raised, further cuts in food assistance would raise the spectre of a famine, as millions of families across Yemen depended on food aid to survive. Supplemental nutrition for 1.7 million children and expecting mothers would be reduced.
Preventable death and disease would follow. Mobile teams and treatment centres for acutely malnourished children would be forced to reduce or stop services. Water and sanitation services in Yemen's major cities may grind to a halt, placing millions of people at risk of water-borne diseases such as cholera.

**Eastern Nigeria camp blaze**

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and humanitarian partners were stepping up assistance to nearly 4,000 displaced people who had lost all their goods in a large fire that had swept through a camp in Maiduguri, in eastern Nigeria’s Borno State. The blaze had left two people dead and hundreds of families had had their shelters destroyed. The fire had broken out on the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid-al-Fitr celebrating the end of Ramadan, at the makeshift camp now hosting some 40,000 internally displaced people. It had begun after sparks from a cooking fireplace spread out and ignited a fire that soon engulfed shelters all around the camp. Houses had been razed to the ground and damaged other facilities. Most of those affected people were women.

A briefing note is available [here](#).

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said that according to IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix, there were more than 830,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe state living in camps or camp-like settings. Four out of five IDPs were living in overcrowded conditions with makeshift and temporary shelters built near each other. In some camps, per capita space was less than one-square metre. This made it nearly impossible to enforce physical distancing, a crucial measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It was essential that additional lands be identified to address these highly congested conditions. IOM was urging the Government of Nigeria and all humanitarian actors to prioritize decongestion efforts and to expand IDP camps in a manner that respected the rights of IDPs, their safety and dignity, and to mitigate the spread of diseases like the COVID-19.

**Geneva announcements**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said today was International Day of UN Peacekeepers, with a special focus on women in peacekeeping. On this occasion, the United Nations was honoring more than one million men and women who had served as United Nations peacekeepers and the more than 3,900 who had lost their lives in the line of duty. In his annual message, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres had said that “women often have greater access in the communities we serve, enabling us to improve the protection of civilians, promote human rights and enhance overall performance.” This was especially important today, as female peacekeepers were on the frontlines in supporting the response to COVID-19 in already fragile contexts.

Tarik Jašarevi?, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said WHO would launch the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool, an initiative aimed at making health tools to fight the pandemic accessible to all. Today’s event would host leaders from across the UN, academia, industry and civil society. The Pool had first been proposed in March by President Carlos Alvarado of Costa Rica, who would join WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus today at the official launch, along with Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados and Aksel Jacobsen, State Secretary of Norway.

WHO would issue a press release on the findings of a survey it had done, and completed by 156 WHO Member States, about the impact of COVID-19 on services for non-communicable diseases.