UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 02 June 2020

02-06-2020 | Press Conferences

**Story**

**COVID-19: logistics operation**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), informed that, since late January, the WFP had dispatched more than 10,000 cubic metres of humanitarian and medical cargo to 121 countries to support governments and health partners in their response to COVID-19. Those shipments included personal protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and gowns, ventilators, emergency health kits, stretchers, thermometers, and water purification supplies, as well as logistics equipment.

WFP was also providing passenger air services to ferry humanitarian and health workers to areas where safe and reliable commercial options were unavailable, with the first regional flight on 1 May between Addis Ababa to Accra regional hubs. Since the service had been launched on 1 May 2020, 88 passenger services had flown more than 1,000 people to 26 destinations across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with 235 organizations signing up to use the service.

Ms. Byrs added that the WFP had set up Global Humanitarian Response Hubs in Guangzhou (China), Liège (Belgium) and Dubai (UAE), close to where supplies were being manufactured – alongside regional hubs in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malaysia, Panama and Dubai. The regional hub in South Africa was in the final stages of opening, pending formalities.
COVID-19: questions and answers with the WHO

Responding to a series of questions, Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that she would look into when the results of the WHO study on hydroxychloroquine would be finalized and shared. Regarding statistics for Europe, she said that a steady, if not speedy, decline was being recorded. New cases were still being reported, though, particularly in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe. Dr. Harris had no further comment or information than Dr. Tedros had provided the previous day regarding the media reports of the United States’ possible withdrawal from the organization; she also had no information on the rules regulating possible withdrawal of Member States from WHO, but she would look into that. Journalists also requested information about the support being provided to Central and South American countries, which Dr. Harris would collect and revert with later today. On the journalists’ request to have technical briefings by WHO experts, Dr. Harris explained that the policy thus far had been to let WHO experts focus on their work, but she also understood the need for the Geneva press corps to have an opportunity to speak to them.

Dr. Harris could not yet provide information at which temperature the virus was killed in laboratory settings. Another question referred to the survival of the virus on different surfaces. Dr. Harris stressed the importance of scrubbing when cleaning surfaces. She referred to the recent WHO guidance on the topic, which can be found on the WHO website. The crucial point was to never touch one’s nose, mouth or eyes with unwashed hands.

Requested for a comment by the UN Secretary-General, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that SG Guterres had repeatedly supported the WHO, describing it as “irreplaceable”.

Opportunities for refugees in Greece

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that the UNHCR was deeply concerned over government-arranged exit of some 9,000 recognized refugees from Greece’s reception system which had begun on 1 June. In the coming months another 11,000 refugees would have to transit from assistance for asylum seekers to general social welfare, once recognized as refugees by Greece’s asylum authorities. A new law adopted in March 2020 reduced the grace period for recognized refugees from six months to 30 days to make a transition from organized accommodation and basic support to an independent living.

UNHCR had continuously expressed concerns that assistance for many recognized refugees was ending prematurely, before they had an effective access to employment and social welfare schemes, foreseen by Greek law. UNHCR had been urging Greece to increase the national reception capacity at sites, apartments, hotels and through cash for shelter. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and measures to reduce its spread created additional challenges by limiting people’s ability to move and find work or accommodation.

Responding to a question, Mr. Mahecic specified that most asylum seekers in Greece were Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis and Congolese.

Full press release can be read here.

Malian refugees in Niger

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that more than a thousand people – a mix of refugees from Mali, displaced Niger nationals and local host communities – were on the run following a brutal attack by irregular armed elements on a site in western Niger on 31 May, which had killed three people and wounded others. Over 50 armed men on motorbikes had swarmed into Intikane, Tahoua region - some 72 kilometres from the Malian border targeted and killed two Malian refugee leaders and a local host community leader. The site hosted some 20,000 refugees and an additional 15,000 displaced Niger
nationals. In addition to brutally killing the three men, the assailants had torched food supplies and other aid items. They had also destroyed mobile phone towers and the main water station and pipes, cutting communication and the water supply to the displaced population and host communities.

UNHCR condemned the killings and called on all sides to respect civilian lives, bring those responsible to justice and make sure such heinous crimes not repeat in the future. Despite violent attacks and insecurity severely limiting humanitarian access to those in need of protection and assistance, UNHCR was stepping up its response in Niger, focusing especially on providing shelter, education and programmes to prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence.

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

**Yemen pledging event**

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), informed that today at 3 p.m. a high-level pledging event for Yemen would start in a virtual format. Everything would be done online, with New York and Riyadh as the places of two co-hosts – the United Nations and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The opening remarks would be given by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The event was expected to last for about four hours, with more than 130 scheduled speakers from all over the world. At 7:10 p.m. Geneva time there would be a press event with UN Humanitarian Coordinator Mark Lowcock, for which questions should be sent to Mr. Laerke in advance.

Mr. Laerke said that the humanitarian community was asking for USD 2.4 billion in total, but it was expected that the full appeal would be funded not just today, but also in the coming days and weeks.

It was not yet confirmed whether Dr. Tedros would speak at the pledging conference, said Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization, in response to a question.

More information about the pledging event can be found [here](#).

**World Environment Day**

Alejandro Laguna, for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), informed that 5 June would be the Environment Day, commemorated since 1974. This year, the host country was Colombia, in partnership with Germany. The theme in 2020 was *Time for Nature*. It was linked to biodiversity: nature underpinned all aspects of human health, yet biodiversity was threatened like never before. Species were currently disappearing at an incredibly faster speed than the average speed of the past 10 million years. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that nature was sending us a message and that we were on the verge of a breakdown. The focus was on building back better after the COVID-19 pandemic was over. Mr. Laguna also spoke about UNEP’s project on biodiversity involving adult snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan; it included beautiful, rare footage of these leopards that would be shared with the media on Friday. Mr. Laguna mentioned a new dance video “Lying Together” by choreographer Corey Baker, which would also be launched on 5 June. More information on the Environment Day is [here](#).

Mr. Laguna also informed that, on the occasion of the World Environment Day, the next Ciné-ONU would take place 5 June at 5 p.m. CET. Ciné-ONU Geneva, partnering with its colleagues from Brussels and Vienna, would organize the screening of Rob Stewart's award-winning film, *Sharkwater Extinction*, followed by a panel discussion. International experts would discuss the loss of biodiversity, exploring drivers such as illegal wildlife trade, and exchange views on possible solutions and what they are doing to halt biodiversity loss. The panel would include: Sandy Campbell, producer of the film, Susan Gardner, Director of Ecosystems Division, UNEP, and Jessica Battle, Senior Expert Global Policy and Governance and Lead Deep Seabed Mining Initiative at WWF. The debate would be moderated by Deborah Seward, Director of United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC).
Protests in the United States

Responding to questions about the ongoing protests and violence in the United States, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), referred to a statement by the Spokesman of the UN Secretary-General, who had said on the previous day that people’s grievances had to be heard, but they also had to be expressed in peaceful ways, and authorities had to show restraint in responding to demonstrators. In the US, as in any other country in the world, diversity was a richness and not a threat, but the success of diverse societies, in any country, required a massive investment in social cohesion. That meant reducing inequalities, addressing possible areas of discrimination, strengthening social protection, providing opportunities for all. All cases of police violence needed to be investigated. The UN had repeatedly urged that police forces around the world needed to have adequate human rights training, and there also needed to be an investment in social and psychological support for police so they could do their job properly in terms of protecting the community.

Answering further questions on the treatment of media, Ms. Vellucci further referred to a tweet by the Secretary-General, who had written that when journalists were attacked, societies were attacked. No democracy could function without press freedom, nor could any society be fair without journalists who investigated wrongdoing and speak truth to power.

Journalists requested Ms. Vellucci to inform OHCHR of their interest to have comments on the situation in the USA. Ms Vellucci noted the request and reminded that on 28 May, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had issued a press release urging serious action to halt police killings of unarmed African Americans.

Ebola

Responding to a question, Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the WHO had been informed of a new Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country which was also battling COVID19 and the world’s largest measles outbreak at the same time. WHO had teams on the ground, along with UNICEF and other UN agencies.

Geneva announcements

Several journalists raised the issue of the upcoming session of the Human Rights Council, asking questions about the availability of documents and in which format this session would take place. Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service, informed that talks were under way on the exact format of the session. Questions should be addressed to the HRC spokesperson Rolando Gomez.

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed that the UNCTAD Secretary-General had nominated Dona Bertarelli as UNCTAD Special Adviser for the Blue Economy. Ms. Bertarelli was a Swiss philanthropist, ocean conservation advocate and entrepreneur, and also the fastest woman to sail around the world. Ms. Bertarelli would help UNCTAD promote a sustainable blue economy, particularly in developing countries, to ensure the responsible and regenerative use of the oceans, seas and coasts for economic growth, while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystems.

Ms. Huissoud also informed that the new analysis post-COVID-19 “How South-South cooperation can support economic recovery” would be published on 3 June. The document would be presented by Richard Wright, Director of the Unit on Economic Cooperation and Integration among Developing Countries at UNCTAD. The COVID-19 crisis was stress-testing the capacity of governance arrangements to deal with unexpected shocks. UNCTAD’s policy brief set out how South-South cooperation, though not a substitute for a proper international response to the crisis, could point towards a better future, said Ms. Huissoud.