UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 12 June 2020

12-06-2020 | Press Conferences

Story


The topics addressed included COVID-19, the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council, the situation in Yemen, a recent ruling on country citizenship laws in The Bahamas, the situation in the Sahel, and reports of pushback at Greece’s sea and land borders.

43rd session of the Human Rights Council

Rolando Gomez, for the Human Rights Council (HRC), said the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council would resume this coming Monday, 15 June, and was scheduled to run all of next week up to Friday, 19 June. The decision to go ahead with the Council session had been taken in accordance with the green light from Swiss authorities on 27 May allowing for gatherings up to 300 people and following an agreement by member States. Several additional measures had been taken to ensure the session could be held while prioritizing the safety and well-being of all participants. The bulk of the resumed session would take place in the Assembly Hall, the largest conference room in Geneva, to give all delegations and members of the civil society the possibility to participate in the meetings, and for the media to observe from inside the room.
Participants who could not travel to Geneva would have the opportunity to deliver their statements via VTC and pre-recorded video messages, which would be screened inside the room and on webcast. At the end of the week, some 40 draft resolutions would be considered.

Mr. Gomez also said that on Monday 15 June at 1.30 p.m., the Council President, Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, would give a press conference to update the press on the programme as well as some future proposals for the upcoming sessions. A virtual organizational meeting of the Council was starting shortly to discuss proposals for the subsequent session of the Council – the 44th session – which was initially scheduled to begin next week. This meeting was being webcast.

Responding to questions, Mr. Gomez said that while some reservations had been voiced, all States who had taken part in the negotiations on the resumption of the 43rd session had said the Council had to continue its in-session work despite the pandemic. The Council sought to ensure that a fruitful exchange could be had, regardless of the venue. Updates would be provided regularly to journalists on who would be participating in the debates and how.

The High Commissioner would be attending the 43rd session, notably to present reports on the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan, but would not be giving an opening speech as this had already been made in March.

The President of the Council had received a letter signed by 600 non-governmental organizations calling for a special session of the Human Rights Council on the situation in the United States following the death of Georges Floyd. Whether such a session would take place and when was up to Member States. It should be noted, however, that combating racial discrimination and racism was very much part of the mandate of the Human Rights Council.

Responding to a question about the use of masks during the Human Rights Council meetings, Alessandra Vellucci, for United Nations Information Service, explained that while their use was recommended in situations where social distancing could not be respected, masks were not mandatory. Many measures, including restrictions on the number of people who could enter the room where the Council would meet, had been taken to ensure proceedings could take place safely.

**COVID-19: situation in Yemen**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that the OHCHR was alarmed at the desperate situation in Yemen, where the healthcare system was on the brink of collapse, and was fearful that countless lives would be lost not only to COVID-19 but as a result of malaria, cholera, dengue fever and other diseases. OHCHR urged international donors to provide immediate relief to help the millions who had already endured five years of warfare. OHCHR echoed the concerns of the UN Secretary-General who said on June 2 that it was now a race against time for Yemen. Already, four out of every five people, 24 million people in all, needed lifesaving aid in what remained the world's largest humanitarian crisis. More than 30 of the 41 UN-supported programmes in Yemen would close in the coming weeks if additional funds were not secured. Now, more than ever, the country needed the outside world's help. OHCHR was calling on the parties to the conflict to agree on an immediate ceasefire, abide by their obligations under international law and take every possible measure to protect Yemenis and ensure their access to medical treatment and information to contain the spread of the current deadly outbreaks in Yemen. And OCHCR was urging them to allow unhindered access and the delivery of much needed humanitarian assistance to civilians across Yemen.

A briefing note was available here.

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nation’s Children Fund (UNICEF), said that in Yemen, humanitarian needs had never been more acute, or funding more constrained. As of today, UNICEF’s $479 million appeal to sustain essential basic services for children this year was just 38 per cent funded. The most immediate and
critical funding gap was for emergency water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) operations, including for the COVID-19 response. Of the 8.4 million Yemenis whose access to WASH would be affected because of insufficient funding, a total of 4 million people – nearly half of them children – directly depend on UNICEF. They were among the most vulnerable Yemenis due to conflict, cholera and internal displacement. Unless UNICEF received USD$30 million by the end of June, water, sanitation and hygiene services would start shutting down for these 4 million people in July. Children in the heart of the world’s worst humanitarian disaster needed help. Funding Yemen’s WASH needs and COVID-19 response was critical to their survival. UNICEF was appealing to donors to step up and dig even deeper to support this lifesaving work.

Responding to questions, Mr. Colville said there has been some misinformation by media in the region about the circumstances surrounding OHCHR’s plans to appoint a new Representative in Yemen, as its current head of office there had effectively been denied entry to the country since the end of September 2019. Reports that the decision to appoint a new representative was based solely on pressure by the de facto authorities in Sana’a were misleading. And reports that OHCHR’s office in Sana’a had been “stormed” by the Houthis were completely invented. While it was of course true that their refusal to allow the current Representative back in the country was a key element in the decision to appoint a new head of office, the main reason behind the decision was a pragmatic and necessary one. OHCHR had decided that the protracted impasse over the Representative was no longer possible, and a decision had been taken in early June to appoint a new one so that the Office could fully and proactively carry out its mandate inside Yemen.

Replying to a journalist’s query, Jens Laerke, for the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that on 2 June, at the High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen, 31 international donors had announced pledges a combined US$1.35 billion to meet the humanitarian needs of people affected by the crisis. As of 12 June, some $637 million or 47 per cent of the pledges had been paid. Between 10 April, when the first case had been confirmed, and 11 June, the authorities in Yemen had announced 564 cases including 130 deaths. The case fatality rate was alarmingly high at around 24 per cent.

COVID-19: situation in Brazil

On the access to information about COVID-19 in Brazil, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), noted that there had been a court ruling requiring that the information be restored and that others had stepped in to keep the flow of information in the public area. He said that, in the context of a pandemic, passage of information to the population, including about the prevalence, was essential to avoid catching and spreading COVID-19.

The Bahamas

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that the OHCHR welcomed the recent court ruling in The Bahamas regarding the country’s citizenship laws which was a positive step towards promoting gender equality and reducing the risk of statelessness. On 25 May, the Supreme Court had ruled that anyone born in The Bahamas was entitled to citizenship at birth if at least one of their parents was a citizen of the country, irrespective of whether the parents were married. This brought the legal framework of The Bahamas more into line with international standards on the right to nationality and equality and non-discrimination. OHCHR encouraged the Government of the Bahamas to build on this ruling and take the necessary legislative, policy and procedural steps to eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender in their nationality laws, as recommended by the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women.

A briefing note was available here.

Libya

Responding to questions on mass graves in Libya, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that, at this stage, apart from the information the United Nations Support
Mission in Libya had put out, OHCHR did not have much additional information. OHCHR was in touch with the authorities, and if they asked for assistance it would try to mobilize assistance. OHCHR was also trying to interview families, to verify deaths, as a number of bodies from the hospital had been returned to families, some of whom may have earlier disappeared.

**International Criminal Court**

On the decision made by the United States government regarding the International Criminal Court (ICC), Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), expressed regret as to the impact such measures may have on the investigations and trials underway in the ICC. The independence of the ICC and ability to operate without interference had to be guaranteed, so that it could decide matters without any improper influences, inducements, pressures, threats or interferences, direct or indirect, from any quarter or for any reason. Victims of gross human rights violations and serious violations of international humanitarian law and their families had the right to redress and to the truth. The measures taken by the United States did not only impact ICC officials, but also their family members.

**Reports of pushback at the sea and land borders in Greece**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said UNHCR was urging Greece to investigate multiple reports of pushbacks by Greek authorities at the country’s sea and land borders, possibly returning migrants and asylum seekers to Turkey after they had reached Greek territory or territorial waters. UNHCR had continuously addressed its concerns with the Greek government and called for urgent inquiries into a series of alleged incidents reported in media, many of which corroborated by non-governmental organizations and direct testimonies. Such allegations had increased since March and reports indicated that several groups of people may have been summarily returned after reaching Greek territory. Some 3,000 asylum seekers had arrived in Greece by land and sea since the start of March, a precipitous drop from previous months and compared to previous years. Yet, the number of reported pushbacks, particularly at sea, had been rising. Greece had the legitimate right to control its borders and manage irregular migration while respecting international human rights and refugee protection standards. Controls and practices must guarantee the rights of asylum seekers and they should not be turned away at Greece’s borders.

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

**Situation in the Sahel**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said UNHCR was alarmed over escalating violence in the Sahel region which has seen hundreds of innocent civilians targeted in recent weeks, triggered more displacement and was seriously hindering humanitarian activities. Attacks by armed groups and ensuing counter-security operations had led to more people fleeing their homes for security and put even more pressure on stretched host communities, already facing immense hardship from dealing with those displaced, often relatives from previous violence. The latest attack on the Binedama village in central Mali’s volatile Mopti region, on June 5, had killed 26 civilians. To highlight the immense needs in the region and continue the ongoing response to the deepening crisis, UNHCR would be launching a [Sahel Crisis Appeal](#) today.

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

**Geneva announcements**
Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed that an embargoed press conference would be held today at 2.30 p.m. CET. for the launch of the World Investment Report, during which Mukhisa Kituyi, UNCTAD Secretary-General, and James Zhan, Director of the Division on Investment and Enterprise at UNCTAD, would speak. The press conference would be embargoed until 16 June at 5 a.m. GMT.

Alessandra Vellucci, for United Nations Information Service, said a “meet and greet” press conference would be held, today after the press briefing, with the Executive Director of UNAIDS, Winnie Byanyima.