UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 17 July 2020

17-07-2020 | Press Conferences

Story

Human Rights Council

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of the Press and External Relations Section at the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), speaking on behalf of the Human Rights Council, said the Council would take action today on the remaining ten draft resolutions and appoint four new human rights experts - on toxic wastes, freedom of expression, the right to health, and human trafficking. At the end of the day, the Council would adopt the report of the forty-fourth session.

More information on the forty-fourth session of the Council can be found here.

Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the number of people in the world who needed humanitarian assistance had more than doubled because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the global lockdown of economies and societies. At the beginning of the year, humanitarian aid had targeted some 110 million people; today, they needed to reach 250 million people with assistance in 63 countries.

In late March, the Global Humanitarian Plan for COVID-19 had been launched, asking for USD 2 billion; the Plan had been updated in May, asking for USD 6.7 billion, and today it was being updated again, seeking
USD 10.3 billion. The main portion of the Plan referred to non-health aspects, such as food, water, and sanitation. There had been a huge increase in the number of starving people; the number could reach 270 million by the end of the year. Until now, USD 1.7 billion had been received for the COVID-19 response, which was generous, but it did not even cover the initial ask from March. Business as usual would not work under the current extraordinary circumstances. The largest donors so far had been the United States, Germany, the European Commission, Japan, and the United Kingdom, explained Mr. Laerke. The world should support those most vulnerable and affected not only because this was the right and humane thing to do, but it was also in their self-interest.

Full press release can be read here.

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), informed that UNICEF’s updated global coronavirus appeal now stood at USD 1.9 billion, up from USD 1.6 billion in May. It covered 155 countries and territories, including the 63 countries in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan. As of mid-July, UNICEF’s USD 1.6 billion appeal was about half funded.

Projections showed that 6,000 children could die from preventable causes every day over the next six months as a direct and indirect result of COVID-19-related disruptions in essential services. At least 30 measles vaccination campaigns could be cancelled, which could result in new outbreaks. Close to 1.2 billion students around the world were affected by school closures, which could further deepen the global learning crisis. Ms. Mercado informed that for every three months of continued lockdowns, there could be an additional 15 million cases of domestic, gender-based violence, at a time when a lot of countries were reporting drops in services provided for addressing gender-based violence. In brief, the pandemic was indeed a child-rights crisis.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said the WFP accounted for about a half of the Global Response Plan. The hunger pandemic was at our door and we all needed to act now; the costs of inaction would grow exponentially unless the right combination of relief and recovery assistance was implemented swiftly. It was estimated the number of acutely food insecure people in countries affected by conflict, disasters or economic crises could increase from 149 million (pre-COVID-19) to 270 million before the end of the year if assistance was not provided urgently.

WFP-FAO early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots identified some 25 countries whose populations were particularly at risk from acute food insecurity under the effect of several drivers, exacerbated by the fallout from COVID-19. Those countries were concentrated in Africa (occupying a swathe from West through Central to East Africa while a number of countries in Southern Africa were also affected); also of concern were countries in Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh); the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen); and parts of Latin America. WFP was scaling operations to provide assistance to 138 million people who were currently facing hunger, said Ms. Byrs.

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that UNHCR was part of the Global Response Plan; UNHCR’s portion remained at USD 775 million, 47 per cent of which was covered thus far. The world’s almost 80 million displaced people were among the most exposed to the threats of the virus, stressed Ms. Mantoo.

Fadéla Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), informed about today’s press conference at 5 p.m, which would be attended by Dr. Tedros and Mark Lowcock, the UN Humanitarian Chief. The two speakers would address a series of both health and non-health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of the Global Response Plan.
Answering a question on a WHO mission in China, Ms. Chaib said this was an advance, exploratory mission of two experts from the WHO; one was an expert on animal health and another was an epidemiologist. WHO had an office in Beijing which provided them support. They were currently setting a scope of the mission, which would, among others, look into the zoonotic origins of the virus.

**COVID-19 and temporary basic income**

Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), informed that UNDP would be launching on 23 July a new report that would call for the immediate introduction of a Temporary Basic Income for the world’s poorest people to slow the current surge in COVID-19 cases by enabling people to stay at home while making sure they had the means to buy food and pay for health and education expenses. The report would present the evidence that the measure was affordable and calculate costs for a time-bound, guaranteed basic income to almost three billion people living below or just above the poverty line in 132 developing countries.

UNDP would organize a press briefing with the senior economist - the author of the report - on 21 July at 3 p.m. Geneva time, when the embargo on the already shared materials would be lifted.

**Mozambican miners in South Africa**

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said that thousands of Mozambican miners were returning to work in neighbouring South Africa for the first time since borders had closed in March due to COVID-19. Five hundred miners screened for the virus by their hiring agency had received health checks at an IOM-operated cross-border Occupational Health Centre created to improve the early diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis, a condition which disproportionately affected mine workers.

IOM advocated for the health-proofing of global mobility systems and saw the integration of migrants into post-pandemic planning as a key to global socio-economic recovery efforts.

South Africa’s gold and platinum mines alone employed roughly 45,000 migrant workers and their skills were considered essential to the resumption of economic activity there.

The agreement between the two countries to allow the flow of properly screened migrant labour across the border by mainstreaming COVID-19 testing was an example of what could be accomplished when governments were encouraged to discuss and plan together for the resumption of cross-border mobility, said Mr. Dillon.

**Use of force in Mali**

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that amid continuing tensions in Mali, where there had been a series of anti-government protests in recent weeks, OHCHR urged the authorities to ensure that security forces refrain from resorting to unnecessary or excessive force in policing demonstrations or otherwise interacting with protesters.

OHCHR was particularly concerned in light of events in the capital, Bamako, on 10 July and over the weekend when special forces (Force spéciale antiterroriste - FORSAT) were reported to have fired lethal ammunition during clashes with demonstrators. The announcement by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta that there would be investigations into the violence was welcome. In line with its mandate, the MINUSMA Human Rights and Protection Division had launched a fact-finding mission to examine allegations of serious human rights violations perpetrated in connection with the protests. OHCHR called on all sides to exercise utmost restraint and use peaceful means to deal with their grievances, which had been triggered by a variety of factors, including the outcome of delayed parliamentary elections, alleged endemic corruption and weak governance, heightened insecurity and violent extremism in different parts of the country.
Rhéal LeBlanc, for the UN Information Service, added that the UN Mission in Mali was working closely with the ECOWAS mediation mission headed by the former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan.

**Political and civil rights in Belarus**

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that the OHCHR called on the Belarusian authorities to ensure full respect for the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and of association. According to information from various NGOs and media sources, over 300 people, including a dozen journalists covering the protests, had been detained by police during protests on 14-15 July.

The demonstrations in Minsk and several other towns had followed the refusal of the electoral commission to register two opposition candidates for the presidential election on 9 August.

Belarus had the duty to facilitate peaceful assemblies and to uphold the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including by those who might be expressing dissenting views and support for opposition candidates, stressed Ms. Throssell. Journalists wanting to cover the protests should not be prevented or obstructed in their work, and subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention.

OHCHR called for all those detained simply for exercising their human rights who were still in detention to be released, and for fair trial and due process guarantees to be met in relation to any criminal or administrative proceedings that might be instituted against them.

Press briefing note can be read [here](#).

**Parliamentary elections in Syria**

Responding to a question, Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), stated that the upcoming elections, this coming weekend, would be held under the current framework, and the UN would not engage. The Special Envoy would brief the Security Council on 23 July, informed Ms. Fenton. Security Council resolution 2254 clearly establishes a framework in which elections administered under UN supervision are to be held in accordance with new constitutional provisions that provide for free and fair elections, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.

**Statelessness law in Ukraine**

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that the UNHCR welcomed a new statelessness law in Ukraine that had come into effect this week. The law would give thousands of people who lacked a nationality a chance to work legally, study and access healthcare among other rights and opportunities, and would ultimately provide a pathway to citizenship, once they were recognized as stateless. It was expected to benefit an estimated 35,000 people in the country who were either stateless or whose nationality was undetermined, including people who had been residing in Ukraine for many years, but had not been able to acquire Ukrainian citizenship or any other nationality due to a lack of documentation or ties to post-Soviet countries. UNHCR stood ready to support authorities in the implementation of the law and had offered its assistance to Ukraine’s State Migration Service, providing training to key staff in their regional departments as well as to legal practitioners. UNHCR would also raise awareness among concerned populations on the possibility to apply for statelessness status.

Full press release is [here](#). More on UNHCR’s work to end statelessness globally [here](#).
Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Responding to questions, Fadéla Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said the Ebola outbreak in the Equateur Province was continuing. The outbreak had been declared in Bandaka on 1 June, and had now spread to six new health zones, with 56 recorded cases. As of 12 July, there had been 20 deaths in the Equateur Province. WHO’s message was that it would not allow COVID-19 to distract it from its work on Ebola. Some USD 2 million had been mobilized to respond, which would be enough for a wide range of activities for another few weeks. More than 12,000 people had been vaccinated since the beginning of June; most vaccinators were from the local population. This was the eleventh outbreak of Ebola in the DRC, and the WHO was applying lessons learned in the past, said Ms. Chaib.

Geneva announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the UN Information Service (UNIS), reminded about the Nelson Mandela International Day on 18 July. On that occasion, the UN Secretary-General would deliver the annual lecture at 3 p.m. Geneva time, which could be watched live at webtv.un.org.

The Human Rights Committee, which was pursuing its 129th session online, would hold today two public meetings to the review (second reading) of its General Comment 37 on Article 21 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.