Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service (UNIS), informed that the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen, in briefing to the Security Council yesterday, had said that his office had now firmed up plans to convene the third session of the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee. Earlier this week, he had been able to confirm with the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian government and the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian opposition that they would begin in Geneva on 24 August – provided that travel conditions do not change. He had also been able to inform the Middle Third members of this as well. He had encouraged all to prepare for a productive session on the agenda. And he hoped that thereafter we will be able to proceed in subsequent sessions in a regular, business-like and substantive manner.

Answering questions, Ms Vellucci confirmed that the meeting should be held physically in Geneva and that correspondents could be accredited for the session. [Later on, the Office of the Special Envoy clarified that journalists who requested accreditation and whose entry into Switzerland met Swiss requirements related to the COVID-19 situation could be accredited. The Office of the Special Envoy would make every effort to keep all interested journalists informed of developments.]

COVID-19, protests and arrests in Zimbabwe
Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the Office was concerned at allegations in Zimbabwe, which suggested that the authorities may be using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to clamp down on freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Among the latest incidents, investigative journalist Hopewell Chin’ono had been arrested on 20 July and charged with inciting public violence, after he had tweeted his support for nationwide protests against government corruption and worsening economic conditions. Jacob Ngarivhume, an opposition leader who had been calling for the protests on 31 July, had also been detained and similarly charged. Merely calling for a peaceful protest or participating in a peaceful protest were an exercise of recognized human rights. The Office was concerned at reports of police using force to disperse and arrest nurses and health workers for infringing lockdown restrictions as they were trying to protest for better salaries and conditions of work. While recognizing the Government’s efforts to contain the pandemic, it was important to remind the authorities that any lockdown measures and restrictions should be necessary, proportionate and time-limited, and enforced humanely without resorting to unnecessary or excessive force.

Responding to a question, Ms. Throssell, said it would be important for the Govern to engaged with society and other stakeholders to find solutions. The country faced huge challenges, some of which were pre-existing and had been exacerbated by COVID-19. The lockdown had affected some of the most vulnerable segments of the population, and inflation had had adverse effects even for those working in the formal economy. In such a context, it was important to uphold social, cultural and economic rights. Further, there was pattern of intimidation in the country. People’s rights and freedoms must be protected in accordance with Zimbabwe’s human rights obligations, she stated.

Protests in the United States

Answering questions on the federal law enforcement officers deployed in US cities, Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said peaceful demonstrations in cities such as Portland should be able to take place without those participating and the journalists reporting on them risking arbitrary arrest nor any other violations. There had been reports of peaceful demonstrators being detained by unidentified officers. That was worrying as it may give rise to arbitrary detentions and other violations. It was important that any victims should have access to remedies. Ms. Throssell pointed out that the Human Rights Committee would soon be issuing a General Comment on Article 21 (Right of Peaceful Assembly) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Office had recently issued guidelines on less-lethal weapons in law enforcement.

UNHCR support to refugees in Brazil

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said UNHCR, was stepping up efforts in Brazil to protect tens of thousands of refugees and migrants from Venezuela and their host communities, as the Latin American country battled the COVID-19 pandemic. Brazil had become the second worst affected country in the world, with nearly 83,000 confirmed deaths and a continuing increase in confirmed cases. Considered an epicenter of the pandemic in Latin America, the situation was taking its toll on the most vulnerable – including the poorest, indigenous populations and other native communities, as well as refugees. All had been disproportionately impacted. While the total number of refugees who had contracted the virus in Brazil was unknown owing to the fact that disaggregated data based on status was not available and absence of widespread testing, UNHCR was aware of at least 19 COVID-19 related deaths among refugees of whom nine were indigenous Venezuelan refugees. As socio-economic conditions worsened among refugee and asylum seeker communities, UNHCR had been disbursing cash assistance to those most vulnerable, including to single mothers, people facing eviction, those severe health issues and survivors of violence.

Full briefing note is available here.
**Tropical storm season and situation the Arctic**

Claire Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said conditions were ripe for a busy tropical storm and hurricane season. Tropical storm Hanna was expected to make landfall in coming days. Turning to Siberia, she noted that exceptional and prolonged heat in Siberia had fueled devastating Arctic fires. At the same time, rapidly decreasing sea ice coverage had been reported along the Russian Arctic coast. Temperatures in Siberia had been more than 5°C above average from January to June, and in June up to 10°C above average. A temperature of 38°C had been recorded in the Russian town of Verkhoyansk on 20 June. Temperatures in parts of Siberia the week beginning 19 July again topped 30°C. The prolonged heat was related to a vast blocking pressure system and a persistent northward swing of the jet stream, allowing warm air into the region. The Siberian heat wave this past spring had accelerated the ice retreat along the Arctic Russian coast, in particular since late June. The melting of ice and thawing of permafrost – thus potentially releasing the greenhouse gas methane – was having a major impact on infrastructure and ecosystems throughout the region.

Responding to questions, Ms. Nullis said wildfires released carbon and reduced the ability of these forests to trap carbon in future years. This was a vicious cycle. As for the temperature, it was not yet possible to say this was a new record, but WMO was updating categories in its weather and climate archives, and setting up a committee to review the tools and instruments it used in that region.

**Other announcements**

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that UNCTAD and the Government of Barbados would officially agree on the organization of the 15th quadrennial United Nations Conference on Trade and Development by signing the Host Country Agreement setting the details of the event to be held in spring 2021. The signing ceremony would be live on WEBEX. The short event would be followed by a press conference with Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, and Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD on Wednesday 29 July 2020 at 3.30 pm Geneva (Switzerland). For this online WEBEX event, journalists would have to register prior to the event at unctadpress@unctad.org. The link to the event would be shared upon registration prior to the event. A press release under embargo would be sent to media on Monday 27 July.

Ms. Huissoud also informed that, on Monday, UNCTAD would issue a document on plastic pollution and how trade policies could help reduce it.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service (UNIS), informed that the Human Rights Committee would close its 129th session today. In a public meeting starting at 5 p.m., the Committee should formally adopt the General Comment No. 37 on Article 21 (Right of Peaceful Assembly) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it reviewed during the virtual 129th session ending now.

Ms Vellucci also informed that for the next two weeks the UN Geneva press briefings would be organized as follows:

- 28 July: online briefing (no presence in Room III)
- 31 July: no briefing (official UN holidays, Palais des Nations closed)
- 4 August: online briefing (no presence in Room III)
- 7 August: online briefing (no presence in Room III)

From the week of 10 August on, the briefings would resume with the current hybrid format.

Ms Vellucci finally reminded that 3 August was also an official holiday of UN Geneva and the Palais des Nations would be closed.