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Story


Democratic People’s Republic of Korea - Women in detention report

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), informed that women detained in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) were subjected to multiple and serious human rights violations by State security and police officials, according to a UN human rights report published today.

The report was based on one hundred first-hand accounts by North Korean women who had been detained in the DPRK from 2009 to 2019 after being forcibly returned. Those women, who had eventually managed to escape the DPRK, had given detailed interviews to UN Human Rights staff. Although traveling abroad was effectively prohibited in the DPRK, women embarked on dangerous journeys looking for life-saving sources of income or a new life abroad. They had often fallen into the hands of human traffickers, ending up as cheap bonded labour or exploited sexually, and, at times, forced into marriage. Upon their return to the DPRK, those women were detained by the Ministry of State Security or the Ministry of People’s Security. The report continued a set of recommendations for the DPRK authorities, including those related to the
Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules, said Ms. Throssell.

Full press release is available here.

**Death of a Kyrgyz human rights defender in prison**

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that it was with great sadness that they had learned about human rights defender and journalist Azimjan Askarov, who had died in prison in Kyrgyzstan over the weekend. In May, the OHCHR had urged the Kyrgyz authorities to allow Askarov, 68, to leave prison as his frail health meant that he had been among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Convicted on various charges, including accessory to murder, incitement of inter-ethnic hatred and hostage-taking in the context of ethnically motivated violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, Askarov had been serving a life sentence and had spent some 10 years behind bars. In 2016, the UN Human Rights Committee had found that Askarov had been arbitrarily detained, held in inhumane conditions, tortured and mistreated, and prevented from adequately preparing his defence.

OHCHR called once again on the Kyrgyz Government to consider an early humanitarian release of the most vulnerable prisoners. With regard to Azimjan Askervov, there should be a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into his death. Under international human rights law, his family had the right to redress.

Full briefing note is available here.

**Turkey’s new social media law**

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that the OHCHR was concerned by the authorities plans in Turkey to introduce a new social media bill that would give the State powerful tools for asserting even more control over the media landscape. The law, if adopted, would further undermine the right of people in Turkey to freedom of expression, to obtain information and to participate in public and political life. It would also further weaken platforms essential for independent journalism.

OHCHR believed that the independent media was already under serious threat in Turkey. Those concerns had been exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to figures provided by the Ministry of the Interior, as of May 2020, at least 510 people had been detained for allegedly “baseless” and “provocative” social media posts about the pandemic and the State’s response to it. Ms. Throssell stressed that legal and regulatory frameworks for such essential fora of expression as social media platforms should only be adopted based on thorough deliberations and broad public debate.

Full briefing note is available here.

**Risks of landmines and explosive devices for displaced in the Sahel and Lake Chad**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), stated that the UNHCR was calling for stronger efforts to mitigate the risks for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) posed by landmines and improvised explosive devices in Africa’s conflict-ridden Sahel and Lake Chad basin regions. Since the beginning of 2020, there had been a growing number of fatal incidents involving forcibly displaced populations. Mines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and more frequent use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were resulting in a growing threat to host populations, refugees and IDPs.

In the most recent incident in a refugee camp in eastern Chad on June 24, four refugee children had been killed and three others had been seriously injured when they had picked up an unexploded device and tried to open it. Meanwhile, in northeastern Nigeria, some 230 people had been killed by IEDs and more than 300 injured in 2019. More than 15 incidents had been reported so far in 2020. UNHCR teams on the ground also
witnessed a rising trend in the Sahel.

Mr. Baloch stressed that urgent efforts were needed to address the dangers and legacy of landmines and to heighten awareness of the horrifying threat from mines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. There was a vital need for governments, humanitarian organizations and parties to conflict to expand mine action work as civilians pay a heavy price.

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

**New allocation from the Central Emergency Response Fund**

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), informed that UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock had released USD 100 million from the life-saving Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to urgently boost humanitarian response in ten under-funded emergencies in Africa, the Middle East, southeast Asia and the Americas.

Together with USD 125 million released earlier, the Underfunded Emergencies Window of the CERF had now allocated USD 225 million to support crisis response in 20 countries this year – the highest annual amount in the fund’s history, up from USD 200 million in 2019 which had itself been a record. The largest single allocation announced was USD 35 million for Yemen, the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. The fund had also been distributed among relief organizations in Afghanistan (USD 13 million); Nigeria (USD 13 million); Mozambique (USD 7 million); Burkina Faso (USD 6 million); Pakistan (USD 6 million); Burundi (USD 5 million); Colombia (USD 5 million); Haiti (USD 5 million) and Uganda (USD 5 million).

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

**COVID-19: questions and answers**

Responding to questions, Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the season and the weather did not seem to be affecting the spread of the COVID-19. Rather, it was people gathering and not observing distance that had an effect on the virus spread. Ms. Harris said that a later flu season was expected in the southern hemisphere; everyone was encouraged to get vaccinated against flu. On another question, Ms. Harris stressed that while testing policies were the responsibility of States, testing was absolutely critical. Regarding a question on the connection between obesity and COVID-19, Ms. Harris said she would follow up with medical experts and revert. Ms. Harris further stated that COVID-19 was a new respiratory virus, which was behaving differently and not necessarily changing with the seasons. She said that the WHO was not defining the pandemic in waves; it was all one wave, with its ups and downs, and the common task was to flatten it.

**Geneva announcements**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), informed about the e-symposium on the role of climatological, meteorological and environmental factors in the COVID-19 pandemic from 4 to 6 August. The coronavirus pandemic continued to spread globally, within a wide range of climates and seasonal and environmental settings. Ms. Nullis said that while environmental conditions were not the principle drivers of the first wave of the pandemic, questions remained as to whether factors such as temperature, humidity, air quality and ultra violet light influenced the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the disease (COVID-19) that it caused. It was critical to understand whether meteorological, climatological and environmental factors promoted the spread of the disease either outdoors or indoors. This was a pertinent scientific question that was the subject of numerous studies.

There would be a concluding statement on the outcomes of the symposium, and the future of research on this aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further information could be found [here](#), and the contact person would be [JShumake-Guillemot@wmo.int](mailto:JShumake-Guillemot@wmo.int).
Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed that the ceremony of Barbados signing the agreement to host UNCTAD15 and a related press conference would be postponed due to the death of a former Prime Minister. A new date would be announced and circulated shortly.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service (UNIS), informed that on 29 July at 1:45 p.m., UNHCR and the Mixed Migration Centre at the Danish Refugee Council would hold a hybrid press conference to launch the report “'On this journey, no one cares if you live or die': Abuse, protection, and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa’s Mediterranean coast”. The speakers would be Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean; Ayala Erin Bonfiglio, Regional Coordinator for Mixed Migration Centre North Africa (online); Maya Sahli-Fadel, African Union Commissioner and Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons and Migrants in Africa (online); and Othman Belbeis, IOM Senior Regional Advisor to the Director General on Middle East and North Africa.

Ms. Vellucci also informed about the launch of the Secretary-General’s brief on the impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia; ahead of the launch, the document would be presented in a briefing on 29 July, at 3 p.m. Geneva time by Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Those interested in the briefing should RSVP to kaneko@un.org.