UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 11 August 2020

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Story

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the hybrid briefing, attended by the spokespersons of the Office of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Refugee Agency, the World Food Programme, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Relief Works Agency, the United Nations Children’s Fund, and a representative of the fund “Education Cannot Wait”.

Lebanon

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), referred to the previous day’s statement by the Secretary-General that the UN was very much standing with Lebanon to alleviate the suffering and help the recovery. The statement by Najat Rochdi, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, was available on UN Web TV.
Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that one week into the response, a clearer picture of the damage was emerging. According to the authorities, more than 60 people remained missing, more than 150 had been killed, and over 5,000 injured. A rapid assessment of the 55 primary health centres in the blast areas showed that some 35 percent had sustained moderate to severe damage. There was fear that the damage to the port would exacerbate food provision in Lebanon. The new UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon, Najat Rochdi, was working around the clock to coordinate between the UN agencies, government agencies and civil sector to provide the best possible response.

Responding to a question, Mr. Laerke said that in the coming days a flash appeal for Lebanon was expected to be launched. This was a question of global solidarity, and donors from around the world were expected to step up.

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said that there were confirmations of three children killed in the blast, while hundreds had been injured. Some children still remained separated from their parents. While there was no major damage reported to water networks, many households reported limited or no access to clean water. Assessments of education indicated that some 20 technical schools had been damaged. Providing precautionary tetanus shots for the injured was among the priorities; personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies (masks, gloves, gowns, etc) were on the way. UNICEF was distributing water and necessary hygiene supplies, and an emergency tent was set up in Beirut downtown. More than 300 young volunteers had been mobilized to clean, cook and provide smaller repairs, reaching some 14,000 households.

Ms. Mercado reminded that UNICEF’s initial appeal had been for USD 8.2 million, but it was supposed to increase significantly.

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), reported that the list of more than 200 fatalities and missing in the explosion which also included at least 34 reported refugee victims so far. Seven refugees were still missing. Another 124 refugees had been hurt in the blast, 20 of them suffering serious injuries. UNHCR continued to work with the rescue teams and other humanitarian partners to identify the victims and were extending support to the families who have lost their loved ones. That included counselling, emergency cash and help with burial arrangements.

As part of the inter-agency humanitarian appeal, UNHCR was mobilizing USD 12 million for its emergency response to the hardest-hit and most vulnerable households in Beirut. UNHCR’s aid stockpile in the country had not been affected and it included shelter kits, blankets, plastic sheeting, mattresses, rub halls and several other critical items that had been made available to the Lebanese Red Cross and other partners on the ground. Multi-purpose cash remained the most effective option to provide immediate relief and to support rapid repair and reconstruction needs.

Full briefing note is available here.

Tamara Alrifai, for the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNHCR), stated that Palestine refugees were among the most vulnerable communities in Lebanon, with a fragile socio-economic situation primarily because of their marginalization and their limited access to the labor market. The majority of some 200,000 Palestine refugees in 12 refugee camps in Lebanon lived below the poverty line, with their situation worse after the lockdowns and economic closures triggered by COVID19. Thankfully most Palestine refugees and UNRWA installations had not been directly affected by the explosion, although two Palestine refugees had lost their lives in the blast.

UNRWA services were a key factor of stability in Lebanon, providing Palestine refugees with essential services like health, education and social services. Most urgent was for UNRWA to be able to continue its cash assistance to Palestine refugees, estimated at 10.5 million for the next round to all Palestine refugees. It was essential to ensure that Palestine refugees in Lebanon be able to weather the economic storm that could
push this vulnerable community to the brink of disaster and trigger more instability in an already volatile region. Ms. Alrifai stressed that Palestine refugees in Lebanon ought to be factored in all response plans.

Ms. Alrifai added that Firas Dahwish, a well-known Palestinian refugee figure on Lebanon’s arts and culture scene because of his work at Agyal Gallery in Beirut, had also lost his life in the blast.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), informed that the WFP Executive Director David Beasley was in Lebanon at the moment, as the WFP was responding to the food needs of the most vulnerable people. As an immediate response following the blasts, WFP had allocated food parcels for 5,000 highly vulnerable households and was preparing to scale up as needed. WFP had also provided food parcels to two local communal kitchens run by Caritas, a local NGO. WFP was planning to expand its existing cash assistance programme in Lebanon, which included Beirut residents who had been directly affected by the blasts. WFP was also planning to provide 50,000 people across Lebanon with monthly food rations for six months.

Ms. Byrs also said that the WFP was bringing into the country a three-month supply of wheat flour and grains for bakeries and mills to help protect against food shortages across Lebanon as the country worked to rebuild its main port. The first wheat shipment was due to arrive within ten days. Current wheat flour reserves in the country were estimated to cover market needs for six weeks, whereas a three-month supply was standard to ensure food security.

Responding to questions, Ms. Byrs stressed that the WFP was concerned about logistics challenges in the aftermath of the destruction at the Beirut Port. WFP was using its rich expertise and presence on the ground to make sure that food deliveries would be able to reach those in need. There were fears that the food prices would spike even further in the coming weeks; the increase in the previous months had been over 100 percent. [Later on, as requested by the journalists, the spokeswoman for WFP added that] “In Lebanon there had been a 109% increase in prices between September 2019 and June 2020. WFP had also recorded a 12.7 percent decrease in food imports between October 2019 and April 2020. With Lebanon relying heavily on imports to meet its food needs, this decrease raised concerns over availability of food and puts additional pressure on prices.”

Tarik Jašarevi?, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that close to 6,000 injured had significantly overwhelmed the health system that had been already reeling from a socio-economic crisis and the ongoing COVID pandemic. The Ministry of Public Health’s (MOPH) central warehouse where WHO-supported essential medical supplies were stored had been severely damaged, necessitating immediate relocation to a different warehouse. Moreover, a recently delivered shipment of PPE, stored at the Beirut port warehouse pending transfer to MOPH’s warehouse, had been completely destroyed, leaving the nation in need of urgent trauma and PPE supplies.

Mr. Jašarevi? said that 18 tons shipment of PPEs was landing in Beirut this morning. Early reports indicated that many health centers and primary care facilities were also damaged and/or out of action. WHO was deeply concerned about the hospital and health workforce capacity, supplies of medicine, and potential chemical contamination and was supporting the Ministry of Public Health in a detailed assessment of the damage to and functioning of health facilities. WHO response priorities included immediate emergency care for injured patients; ongoing assessments of health impact and humanitarian health needs; coordination of the international response; continuity of COVID care; procurement of PPE for health workers; and provision of essential medical supplies to fill urgent gaps.

On 12 August, at 3 pm Beirut time, there would be an online press conference with the WHO Country Director and the Middle East Director.
Yasmine Sherif, Director of Education Cannot Wait, said that the fund had dedicated USD 15 million for children education in Lebanon. They were now working with the Ministry of Education and partners to assess the damage, based on which additional funding would be released.

**COVID-19**

Tarik Jašarević, for the World Health Organization (WHO), responding to questions, said that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Lebanon stood at 6,517, with 76 deaths. Given the blast and its aftermath, COVID-19 was not a priority for many people, but it was important to bear in mind that the virus would explore any possibility to spread, blast or not. Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), emphasized that it was critical to integrate COVID-19 in all response.

On another question, Mr. Jašarević said that accelerating progress on vaccine development could not come at the cost of compromising vaccines’ safety and efficiency. A draft landscape overview of candidate vaccines was maintained and updated weekly on the WHO website. All candidate vaccines would need to be thoroughly reviewed; all the criteria could be found on the WHO’s website. There were currently over 160 candidate vaccines, Mr. Jašarević explained. Answering another question, Mr. Jašarević said he could not provide an exact date when the members of the vaccine review panel would be announced.

**Refugees from Sudan arriving in Chad**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that recent violence in Western Darfur had forced Sudanese refugees to seek safety in neighbouring Chad. Since the end of July 2020, at least 2,500 people had crossed the international border while ethnic-related unrest had affected an estimated 20,000 people within Western Darfur in Sudan, the majority of whom were women and children. Attacks, blamed on armed nomads, in West Darfur’s Masteri town had killed 61 people from the Masalit community and injured at least 88 on 25 July. Houses were also reported to have been burned to the ground in the town and the surrounding villages.

UNHCR, in collaboration with the Government of Chad and its national partners, was relocating the refugees from the border areas to the Kouchaguine-Moura refugee camp. The camp had already been hosting more than 6,000 Sudanese who had arrived in February 2020. However, relocation to the camp by convoy was proving slow, due to poor road conditions and heavy rains. The first two convoys with 443 refugees had arrived the previous week.

Chad currently hosted 476,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including some 365,000 from Sudan, informed Mr. Baloch.

Full press release can be found [here](#).

**Children’s Education**

Yasmine Sherif, Director of Education Cannot Wait, a global fund for children’s education in conflicts and protracted crises, presented the 2019 report “Stronger Together in Crisis.” The report emphasized the importance of cooperation among various sectors of society on joint programming. A total of 3.5 million children and youth in conflict-affected countries had been reached by “Education Cannot Wait”. More than 50 percent of beneficiaries were girls, and some 30 percent were refugees. The rationale was not to leave anyone behind; it was encouraging to see growing investment in the education in crisis. Ms. Sharif provided examples of increased access to education in Uganda and Afghanistan, thanks to the actions taken by the fund. Ms. Sherif emphasized the need to invest in education and appealed to partners from across the world, governmental, non-governmental and private sector, to continue supporting access to education.

**Geneva Announcements**
Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), reminded that today, 11 August at 2 p.m. the ILO would hold a press conference to launch a report on the impact of COVID-19 on youth. The study analysed how learning had been affected by the transition from classroom to online and distance learning and how this might affect their future careers and job prospects. The press conference would be led by the head of the ILO’s Employment Policy Department, Sangheon Lee; other experts able to take questions would cover Asia, Africa, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America. The report and the press release were under embargo until 8 p.m. today, 11 August 2020.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the UN Information Service, informed that on 13 August, under the presidency of Bangladesh, the Conference of Disarmament would hold two public plenaries (morning and afternoon).

On 12 August, the international community would commemorate the International Youth Day. This year the theme was “Youth Engagement for Global Action.”