UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 14 August 2020

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Story

Rhéal LeBlanc, Chief of the Press and External Relations Section of the United Nations Information Service, chaired the hybrid briefing, attended by the spokespersons of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Food Programme, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Children’s Fund.

Agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said the agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates suspends Israeli annexation plans over parts of the occupied West Bank, something the Secretary-General had consistently called for. Annexation would effectively close the door for a renewal of negotiations and destroy the prospect of a viable Palestinian State and the two-State solution. The Secretary-General welcomed this agreement, hoping it will create an opportunity for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to re-engage in meaningful negotiations that would realize a two-state-solution in line with relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements. Peace in the Middle East was more important than ever as the region confronted the grave threats of COVID-19 and radicalization. The Secretary-General would continue to work with all sides to open further possibilities for dialogue, peace and stability.

Responding to a question on the financial situation of the United Nations, Mr. LeBlanc said that, generally, the financial situation was still fragile. According to the latest information, 109 Member States, out of 193, had paid their regular contribution to the budget until now. The United Nations was operating in a very difficult budgetary context and had to be extremely vigilant, trying to work around the situation as best as
Lebanon

Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said UNDP was working alongside humanitarians in Lebanon on the immediate response to the crisis, to restore livelihoods and small business as well as to clear debris from the blast and support access to justice for impacted vulnerable groups.

Rekha Das, Chief Technical Advisor, Syria Crisis Response for the United Nations Development Programme-Lebanon, said the blast on 4 August had hit Beirut, but impacted all of Lebanon. The coping capacities of the people in Lebanon had been tried beyond anybody’s imagination – through a crippling economic crisis, the COVID 19 pandemic and now the blast. UNDP would support economic recovery in the hardest hit areas of Beirut. COVID-19 had already compounded Lebanon’s economic crisis. Last year alone more than 5,000 factories had shut down, and this year nearly 800 restaurants had closed, leaving tens of thousands of unemployed, and, without a social safety net, more people in poverty. UNDP’s priority was to support economic and social protection recovery by reviving businesses and livelihoods in the hardest hit areas. UNDP would create employment, provide cash grants and loans for restarting small and medium-sized enterprises in a sustainable way, not least for the many women who had lost their livelihoods.

Violet Warnery, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said the devastating explosions at Beirut’s port had caused destruction that was hard to fathom. And it had happened in a context of an already collapsed economy, political instability and a surge in COVID-19 cases. From the outset, UNICEF had been with the Lebanese people, working to protect children and the health, water and education facilities that keep them safe. UNICEF’s revised appeal to reach 100,000 children with support and assistance over the next three months was $46.7 million dollars. It includes three major pillars. First: keeping children safe. This included mental health and psychosocial support to help children and their families recover from trauma. Second: rehabilitating the basic essential services that keep children safe. Many homes still didn’t have access to safe, sufficient water for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene, so the response included repairing damaged water and sanitation facilities and systems. Finally, with resources and tools provided by UNICEF, the work done so far by young volunteers, to clean debris, deliver food and water, even sew face masks – had been perhaps the most inspiring and hopeful aspect of the response thus far. The revised appeal would provide training and resources to equip thousands more adolescents with the skills they need – whether it was carpentry or plumbing or construction – to be part of the effort to rebuild their country. Assessments were already underway for what a longer sustained response to Lebanon will look like – one that holistically responds to the multiple challenges the country faces – a huge refugee population; the socio-economic-political crisis; COVID-19; and the destruction wrought by the explosion. Lebanon’s children needed the international community’s sustained attention and support. They deserved nothing less.

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said WFP was on the ground responding to the immediate and longer-term food needs of the most vulnerable people across Lebanon. It was bringing into Lebanon 17,500 metric tons of wheat flour and a three-month supply of wheat to help replenish the country’s food reserves that were damaged in the explosion of Beirut Port. The first wheat flour shipment was due to arrive to Beirut Port by 20 August to provide immediate support to bakeries, followed by wheat that would go to local mills. It was essential to get part of the port operational again as quickly as possible. WFP was also rolling out a rapid logistics operation that would involve setting up warehouses and mobile grain storage units to augment Beirut Port facilities. The emergency assistance WFP was rolling out in Lebanon required a total of $235 million for 6 months to provide food support to the most vulnerable, as well as logistics and supply chain support to the country.

Angela Wells, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said IOM was launching an appeal to raise $10.3 million to assist more than 43,000 people affected by the explosions at the port of Beirut. As the international community galvanized efforts to respond to the needs of hundreds of thousands of people affected by this tragedy, the international community must not forget the migrant and refugee populations who are at risk of being overlooked. The explosions had devastated economically disadvantaged areas in
Beirut and Mount Lebanon, which host large numbers of migrant workers and Syrian refugees. IOM estimated that roughly eight per cent of the estimated 300,000 people affected in Greater Beirut were migrant workers, primarily from Ethiopia, Bangladesh and the Philippines. At least 150 migrant workers had been injured and 15 had died in the explosions.

Responding to questions, Ms. Byrs said she had no doubts donors would respond to the WFP’s appeal, as well as that of other United Nations agencies. WFP had programmes in Lebanon before the blast, which were still operating. It now needed an additional $235 million to provide food and logistical support in the country over the next six months. It was aiming to scale up its operations to reach one million people in Lebanon.

Responding to a question about pollution, Ms. Das said UNDP was still assessing the situation, considering that some of the debris was toxic or electronic. The extent to which the Mediterranean had been polluted, for instance, was still unknown. The magnitude of the problem was greater because of waste management issues that pre-dated the blast. Given that there were many volunteers on the ground, UNDP was starting with a small ask for the debris removal, around $3 million. It would likely ask for more as its operations moved into next phases.

Providing answers to a series of questions, Ms. Warnery said there were 100,000 children whose homes were damaged or destroyed. Approximately 1,000 were injured because of the blast. Most children had been reunited with their parent or caregivers, or at least knew where they were. On gender-based violence and child protection, one of the main challenges was to ensure that services were available, and that people were aware of it. A hotline had also been setup. On children out of school, UNICEF had been working with the Government and other partners to improve and support distance learning, tackling issues such as families’ access to electricity, as well as connectivity matters.

Ms. Wells said no Syrians would be returned to Syria. Rather, refugees were being resettled to third countries, such as Canada and Australia. These operations have been ongoing in Lebanon for years. Through the voluntary return programme, OIM would hopefully be able to assist migrants who wished to go back home. This, however, required funds as well as political will.

Ms. Bel said the global appeal, subject to confirmation after a meeting with the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was $2.5 million for immediate shelter support; $2 million for debris; $3 million for cash for work; $2 million for family food security kits; $0.3 million for legal aid. The total stood at $9.8 million.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said a flash appeal for Lebanon would be launched later today. More information would be shared with the press as soon as it was available.

Statement on Al Hol camp in Syria

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Mr. Imran Riza, had expressed concern and alarm over the recent deaths of eight children under the age of five last week in Al Hol camp, Northeast Syria. The children, who had died between 6 and 10 August, were suffering from a range of illnesses, including malnutrition-related complications, dehydration from diarrhoea, heart failure, internal bleeding and hypoglycemia. The United Nations and humanitarian partners continued to provide a range of critical assistance to Al Hol, including emergency, primary and reproductive health care; water trucking; shelter, NFIs, food and hygiene distributions; nutrition; and protection. However, access to some basic services, including regular water supply and emergency healthcare, had been increasingly compromised in recent months, for reasons such as disruptions to water supply from the Alouk water station and COVID-19 precautionary measures. The tragic deaths have occurred at a time when health services at the camp were under increased pressure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of August, five health workers at Al Hol had tested positive for COVID-19, leading to the temporary closure of one field hospital and disruptions to another. In response, health facilities had been disinfected, and other exposed workers were in self-quarantine and contact tracing was ongoing. Additionally, only critical staff with personal
protective equipment could operate inside the camp.

Responding to a question, Mr. Laerke said that nearly 40,000 children from more than 60 countries continued to languish in Al Hol. They lacked access to basic services and had to contend with the sweltering summer heat and the trauma of violence and displacement. In response to another question, he said that in the past the United Nations had advocated that countries whose nationals, especially children, were in Al Hol should be more forthcoming in taking them back.

**Food security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said WFP was ramping up operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo to meet increasing needs. The Democratic Republic of Congo was the world’s second biggest hunger emergency after Yemen, and a uniquely challenging one. No fewer than 15.6 million people were acutely food insecure, suffering “crisis” (IPC Phase 3) or “emergency” (IPC Phase 4) hunger, according to the latest nationwide assessment. Another 27.4 million were in a “stressed” state, at high risk of rapid deterioration. Malnutrition was pervasive, and the country’s five million IDPs – Africa’s largest internally displaced population – were now at even greater risk because of COVID-19. Conflict and inter-ethnic violence had forced more than one million civilians from their homes in eastern part of the country in the first half of 2020, aggravating already complex displacement and hunger crises. Furthermore, Ebola persisted. WFP needed $172 million to prevent millions of at-risk Congolese plunging deeper into hunger in the next six months.

Responding to questions, Ms. Byrs said 3.4 million children were acutely malnourished in the country. WFP aimed at reaching 8.6 million people in 2020, after having assisted 6.9 million in 2019. By January, WFP needed $172 million. The Democratic Republic of Congo had typically been the poor relation when it came to donations. If WFP did not get adequate funding, it would have to reduce its operations, cut food rations, and therefore assist fewer people.

**Geneva Announcements**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) would open its virtual 23rd session in public next Monday, 17 August, at 2 p.m. The only other public meeting of this session would take place at 3.30 p.m. on 4 September, for the closure of the session. You can follow the session on unweb.tv

As for the other treaty bodies, due to COVID-19, all constructive dialogues with the States parties scheduled for this session had been postponed to future sessions.

The Conference on Disarmament, whose third and last part of this year’s session ran from 3 August to 18 September, had not yet indicated the date of its next meeting.

On International Humanitarian Day, 19 August, a ceremony would be organized outside of Room XX at 3 p.m. Journalists could attend in person or virtually, as it would be webcast. Speakers would include the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.

Mr. LeBlanc added that a former Director of UNIS, Thérèse Gastaut, had passed away this week. Ms. Gastaut had also been the Director of the Department of Public Information’s Public Affairs Division and the Spokeswoman for the Nairobi and Beijing Women’s Conferences. A service would be held on Wednesday at Église Saint-Jean XXIII in Petit-Saconnex at 10.30 a.m.