UNOG-RUSH-NEWS Briefing 18AUG2020 Zoom recording

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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 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, and the World Meteorological Organization.

**Safer oil tanker off the coast of Yemen and situation in Bolivia**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), addressing the safer oil tanker off the coast of Yemen, recalled that over the weekend the Secretary-General had urged the removal of any obstacles to the efforts needed to mitigate the dangers posed by the Safer tanker without delay. The Secretary-General specifically had called for granting independent technical experts unconditional access to the tanker to assess its condition and conduct any possible initial repairs. This technical assessment would provide crucial scientific evidence for next steps to be taken in order to avert catastrophe. A potential oil leak into the Red Sea would severely harm Red Sea ecosystems relied on by 30 million people across the region. It would moreover force the closure of Hudaydah port for many months, which would exacerbate Yemen’s already severe economic crisis and cut off millions of people from access to food and other essential commodities.

On Bolivia, the Secretary General’s Personal Envoy, Jean Arnaud, had welcomed the agreement reached Friday among the Executive Branch, the Plurinational Legislative Assembly and the Plurinational Electoral
Organ regarding the 2020 general elections. The Secretary General’s Personal Envoy had also welcomed the unanimity achieved by the political parties in the Plurinational Legislative Assembly and the members of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. This consensus was a fundamental achievement that provides guarantees regarding the date of the elections. It helped to overcome political divisions and the uncertainty that worried many sectors of Bolivian society, mobilized or not, as well as the international community itself. With this consensus, the path towards a reliable electoral process whose results are respected by all actors was effectively consolidated.

Responding to a question on Syria, Mr. LeBlanc said UNIS hoped to be able to provide more information in coming days about the meeting of the Constitutional Committee due to take place next week.

**Lebanon**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, was in Beirut today, starting a four-day visit to support and listen to the plight of all those affected by the devastating blast a fortnight ago – people of Lebanon, migrants and refugees alike. This was the first field mission for the High Commissioner since the COVID-19 first wave lockdown and it was a reaffirmation of UNHCR’s solidarity and commitment to stand by Lebanon. Operations in support of Lebanese communities and refugees remained a top priority for UNHCR. Relative to its national population, Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees in the world. Beyond the immediate and longer-term impact of the tragic explosion of 4 August, UNHCR was concerned about the combined effect of a severe economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. These three factors together were harming the most vulnerable and poorest parts of the population throughout the country. After seeing the ongoing response in the most affected neighbourhoods and meetings in the capital tomorrow, High Commissioner Grandi would dedicate the next days to review UNHCR’s overall humanitarian response in other parts of the country.

A briefing note is available [here](#).

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), added that the United Nations along with its partners continued to conduct needs assessments on site and deliver emergency assistance to people most in need in Beirut.

Responding to questions, Mr. Baloch said High Commissioner Grandi would be in Lebanon for four days. In that context, UNHCR’s priority was to stand in solidarity with the Lebanese people. The economic crisis, COVID-19 and now the blast made life very difficult for the Lebanese and refugees.

There were more than 800,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, many of whom had been affected by the blast. Because of the blast, 13 refugees had died, 224 had been injured, and 57 were unaccounted for. There were over 200,000 refugees in Beirut and the surrounding area.

UNHCR’s portion of funding appeal was $35 million for emergency response to the hardest hit and vulnerable households in Beirut for the next three months. UNHCR had been providing immediate support to 84,000 people in need of urgent support.

Responding to journalists’ questions, Tamara Alrifai, for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), explained that there were over 200,000 Palestine refugees in Lebanon who formed one of the most vulnerable communities in the country. Two Palestine refugees lost their lives in the explosion on 4 August, and 16 were injured (some very seriously).
It was very important to factor in the needs of Palestine refugees in any medium-term humanitarian response; most importantly, it was crucial to enable UNRWA, the main healthcare provider to Palestine refugees in Lebanon, to reinforce measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, through testing, access to healthcare, clean water and sanitation, as well as effective management of suspected and confirmed cases in quarantine and isolation centres.

**Mounting Violence in Burkina Faso**

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said escalating violence had now driven more than one million people from their homes in Burkina Faso, 453,000 since the start of the year, according to figures published Monday night by national authorities. Five per cent of the country’s entire population - an astonishing 1 in 20 people - was now displaced in the world's fastest-growing humanitarian and protection crisis. Attacks by armed groups in the north and east of the country had forced people to move multiple times and are set to push the numbers still higher. Most of the displaced had fled the northern and eastern regions of the country, often being forced to flee multiple times. The two regions of the Centre Nord and the Sahel host 76 per cent of all internally displaced people. Host populations were at a breaking point as they shared the little resources they had while also facing themselves poverty, strained health services and rapidly disappearing livelihoods. For people who had fled wars and persecution and for the communities hosting them, the additional impact of COVID-19 was devastating. With funds available representing 53% of the appeal, UNHCR was providing more core relief items and shelters, to decongest the most overcrowded sites. Teams were also working to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, which had become widespread and aggravated by confinement and overcrowding. UNHCR was also rehabilitating schools and classrooms and providing distance-learning opportunities.

A briefing note is available here.

Responding to questions, Mr. Baloch said that, while COVID-19 was a concern, luckily there had not been a large scale spread of the virus on the ground. However, the large-scale displacement in Burkina Faso and the Sahel created significant challenges for the UNHCR.

**Record Temperature in Death Valley in California**

Claire Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said the weather station at Furnace Creek in Death Valley, California, had reported a temperature of 54.4°C (130°F) on Sunday 16 August. WMO would now set up a committee of experts to verify this temperature reading. If validated, it would be the highest temperature on Earth since 1931 and third hottest temperature ever recorded on the planet. WMO’s weather and climate extremes rapporteur, Randall Cerveny, said that all the indications so far were that this was a legitimate observation. WMO would now assemble an international team of atmospheric scientists to carefully examine the observation, including equipment and observation practices. These WMO investigations into weather extremes were quite detailed and took time so it was likely a full, completed evaluation would not be available for many months. However, at this time, based on available evidence, WMO was preliminarily accepting the observation pending the completion of a full examination.

Responding to questions, Ms. Nullis said that, according to the Weather and Climate Extremes archive, the hottest temperature ever recorded was in Furnace Creek, Death Valley, California, at 56.7°C on 10 July 1913. The highest temperature for the Eastern hemisphere was set in July 1931 in Kebili, Tunisia, at 55.0°C. Other high temperature records included 54.0 °C in Mitribah, Kuwait, on 21 July 2016 and a second in Turbat, Pakistan, on 28 May 2017. Some weather historians had questioned the accuracy of old temperature records. The WMO Archive for Weather & Climate Extremes was always willing to investigate any past extreme record when new credible evidence was presented.

**Geneva Announcements**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that tomorrow, on World
Humanitarian Day, the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, would take part in a ceremony organized at the Palais des Nations at 3 p.m. It would be webcast. The father of a UN staff member killed during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and representatives of the Permanent Mission of Iraq, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the UNOG Staff Coordinating Council would also deliver remarks.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) had opened its virtual 23rd session yesterday. The only other public meeting of this session would take place at 3.30 p.m. on the 4 September, to close the session. It would be webcast on UNWeb.tv As for the other treaty bodies, because of COVID-19, all constructive dialogues with the States parties scheduled for this session had been postponed to future sessions.

The Conference on Disarmament, which third and last session for this year would run until 18 of September, had not transmitted any information concerning the date of its next meeting yet. After Bangladesh, whose presidency would run until the 21 August, Belarus would assume the presidency of the Conference until the end of this year’s session, from 24 August to 18 September.

Mr. LeBlanc added that yesterday’s World Health Organization Global COVID-19 press briefing had been rescheduled to 12 p.m. Geneva time.

audio for this briefing is available here: https://bit.ly/320Y6Fw