UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 25 August 2020

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Story

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), chaired the hybrid briefing, which was addressed by the Spokespersons of the Office of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development, the World Food Programme, and the World Meteorological Organization.

Spokespersons for the International Labour Office, the International Organization for Migration, UN-Habitat and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees were present but did not speak.

Office of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria
Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, said journalists should have received a statement from the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria yesterday saying that they had received confirmation that four [not three, as previously announced] members of the Syrian Constitutional Committee Small Body had tested positive for COVID-19. Having informed the Swiss authorities and the United Nations Office at Geneva, immediate measures had been taken consistent with protocols to mitigate any risks, and tracing of anyone who may have been in close contact with affected persons was underway. Committee members were tested before they travelled to Geneva, and they were tested again on arrival, and the wearing of masks and strict social distancing measures had been in place when they met at the Palais des Nations. Following a constructive first meeting, the Third Session of the Constitutional Committee was currently on hold. The Office of the Special Envoy would make a further announcement in due course.

A member of ACANU said journalists had complained that questions they sent to the Office of the Special Envoy yesterday had not been answered. She asked why when the Committee members had been tested on arrival, they did not wait for the results of the tests to be ready before coming to the Palais des Nations and exposing everyone.

In response to questions, Ms. Fenton said the tests that took place in Geneva had been an additional precaution after the first tests had been negative. Full mitigation measures had been in place during the meeting. Any updates regarding next steps in the process would be provided in due course. The Office of the Special Envoy, since the outbreak began, had followed the necessary guidelines and taken the necessary precautions, and would continue to do so. The Office was taking the advice of the Medical Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva, which was liaising with the Geneva Cantonal health authorities. The Special Envoy had observed all the recommended safety measures during his interactions with Committee members and other interlocutors. He had been advised that he did not need to quarantine. The persons who had tested positive had committed to maintain strict isolation.

Responding to another question by a journalist on what correspondents had to do if they had been in contact with the members of the Committee, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the UNOG Medical Service could help by providing the guidelines and what procedures should be followed.

Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization, said the first thing to know was what the exposure had been: had the journalists been in close contact and proximity, closer than two metres, or closer than one metre for longer than 15 minutes, in a closed environment, with or without a mask? Had they washed their hands? All these conditions were important, and if in doubt, the journalists should contact the staff who were in charge of the contact tracing. The journalists should also monitor their health. While waiting for the results of possible tests, the journalists should self-isolate from family members and others.

**Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 in Afghanistan**

Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said in late July UNDP had finalised a report on the socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. The results were quite alarming and showed that poverty could dramatically increase among the majority of the population. While the report was finalised some weeks ago, the dramatic impact of the pandemic was growing and was requiring more than ever additional support for the most vulnerable.

Abdallah Al Dardari, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Afghanistan, said the COVID-19 pandemic had only accentuated an already very challenging developmental situation in Afghanistan. Poverty had been increasing in Afghanistan before the pandemic, increasing from around 40 per cent to almost 55 per cent from 2001 to 2019. With COVID-19, the percentage had increased to 69 per cent according to the UNDP model, and was expected to grow further according to the transmission scenarios prepared by the Ministry of Public Health in Afghanistan. Multi-dimensional poverty had also increased considerably in the past few months, averaging 70 per cent as well. Unemployment had
jumped from 15 per cent to around 21 per cent and was expected to remain at that level until 2024. There had been a dramatic drop in GDP by almost 6 per cent. All this had a dramatic impact on a country that had already been suffering from considerable developmental challenges in addition to the security and political challenges.

UNDP had proposed a set of scenarios for social protection schemes that could alleviate the immediate and short-term impact, including possible cash transfers to the working population, but that would cost 12.5 per cent of GDP, way beyond the fiscal space available to Afghanistan. UNDP was simulating the impact of cash transfers to the elderly, above 65 years old, and that would cost 43 million dollars, i.e. 0.23 per cent of GDP, which would be bearable. The impact of the pandemic on the implementation of the Strategic Development Goals in Afghanistan had been hard and UNDP was currently preparing a detailed assessment on this impact.

**Lebanon**

On WFP’s logistic operation in Lebanon, Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that as of today, WFP had brought 12,500 metric tonnes of wheat flour to stabilise the price of bread across the country. The wheat flour shipment had arrived in Beirut on 18 August. WFP had also airlifted and delivered equipment to enable bulk grain handling and storage to ensure there was no disruption in the commercial food supply chain. WFP had started constructing mobile storage units at Beirut airport which would be used to store the wheat flour if needed, and could also be used as storage space for both food and non-food items by other humanitarian partners or the private sector. WFP had procured 150,000 food parcels to distribute to families impacted by the economic crisis and COVID-19 lockdown measures. The emergency assistance that WFP was working on required a total of 235 million dollars.

In response to questions, Ms. Byrs said that 30 per cent of the port of Beirut was operational and WFP was using it. WFP was also expanding its e-voucher programme, to avoid any disruption in the food supply chain and to stabilise food prices in the country.

**Rohingya Crisis Three Years On**

Elisabeth Byrs, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that three years into the Rohingya crisis, men, women and children in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, were more vulnerable than ever, facing multiple crises. Almost all Rohingya remained entirely dependent on WFP food assistance to survive. The main refugee camp was the largest and most overcrowded in the world. Social distancing was almost impossible. An uncontained outbreak of COVID-19 in this camp could be devastating. More than 109,000 persons in the camp had been affected by the Monsoon rain, with almost 9,000 displaced since the first of June. WFP had been launching its rapid emergency response plan to provide food support when needed. The availability of food in the camp outside of WFP assistance had been shrinking, with prices rising and disruptions in the supply chain. The international community must not turn its back on the Rohingya. WFP was spending 24 million dollars every month to feed 860,000 refugees. Without continued support, the situation for these refugees would rapidly deteriorate. The multiple crises needed funding contributions. There were more details in the briefing notes.

**Tropical Storm Laura**

Claire Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (IOM), said this time last week she had been briefing journalists on the extreme heat in the United States. Now, the United States was facing two major hazards from floods and from fire. The very active Atlantic tropical cyclone season was continuing. Tropical Storm Laura had developed and was expected to strengthen into a hurricane later today. It was expected to further strengthen on Wednesday and could be a strong category 2 when it approached the coast of the United States. The situation was of concern and the emergency response and preparations were complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Tropical storm Laura had already hit Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Cuba had factored COVID-19 preparedness, with mask wearing and social distancing, into its emergency planning.

On the west coast in California, there were very bad wild fires again, which had destroyed more than one million acres of land – more than 400,000 hectares – and claimed a number of lives. There was risk of more dry thunderstorms, which brought lightening and could start fires, but had very little rain.

Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, reminded journalists that the Secretary-General’s policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on tourism had been launched today. The brief stressed the urgency of mitigating the impact on livelihoods, especially for women and youth, in the informal sector. Information had been sent to journalists with the brief, key messages and a link to the press briefing given yesterday.

Catherine Huissond, for the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), added that on 1 July UNCTAD had issued a report analysing the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, and in particular on small island developing States, which depended heavily on tourism.

UNCTAD

Catherine Huissond, for the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that the fifteenth UNCTAD quadrennial conference would be held in Bridgestone, Barbados, from 25 to 30 April 2021. Reports which would be issued in the coming months would focus on the debates and negotiations on the mandate of UNCTAD for the next four years.

The first global report would be on trade and development and would be under embargo until 22 September 2020. On 8 September, UNCTAD would issue its annual report on its assistance programme to the Palestinian people. There would be a press conference on 7 September. At the end of September, UNCTAD would issue its 2020 report on economic development in Africa. The press kits on all the reports would be sent to journalists in advance under embargo.

COVID-19

In response to a question on the risk of re-infection or second infection of COVID-19, including one documented case in Hong Kong and others elsewhere, Margaret Harris for the World Health Organization (WHO) underlined that this clearly documented case was one in over 23 million. It was important to note that the numbers were very small. Re-infection seemed to not be a regular case, or we would have seen many more cases. It was very important to understand what this meant in terms of immunity and there were a lot of research groups actively tracking people, measuring anti-bodies, and trying to understand how long the natural immune protection lasted. This was not the same as the immune protection that a vaccine provided, which should be stronger.

Announcements

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the press briefing of Tuesday, 1 September would exceptionally start at 11 a.m. instead of 10:30 a.m. as usual. She would remind journalists again next Friday.

Ms Vellucci also reminded that today, Tuesday, 25 August at 8:00 am New York time/2 pm Geneva time, the Office of the UN Secretary-General’s spokesperson would hold an embargoed briefing ahead of the release of the Secretary-General’s report on Digital Financing which would be launched on Wednesday, 26 July at 10:00 a.m. New York time. The briefers would be Achim Steiner, UN Development Programme Administrator and Co-Chair of the Task Force on Digital Financing of the Sustainable Development Goalst,
and Simon Zadek, head of the Task Force Secretariat. The briefing and all the related materials were embargoed until the launch of the report tomorrow at 10 a.m. New York time.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities would meet in public at 3:30 p.m. on 4 September to close its session.

The Conference on Disarmament planned to hold a public plenary on Thursday, 27 August at 10 am. to be devoted to the annual report on the 2020 session, which would conclude on 18 September.