



UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 06 October 2020

06-10-2020 | Press Conferences

Story

45th Human Rights Council

Rhéal LeBlanc, speaking on behalf of the Human Rights Council (HRC), informed that the Council would be taking action on 37 draft resolutions today and tomorrow. The list had been shared with the media. The session could be followed live at webtv.un.org.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Mr. LeBlanc informed about the [statement](#) from the UN Secretary-General on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Secretary-General condemned the continuing escalation of violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, despite repeated appeals from the international community to immediately stop the fighting. He was gravely concerned by reports of the extension of hostilities, including the targeting of populated areas, and underlined that there was no military solution to the conflict.

World Habitat Day

Christine Knudsen, Director of External Relations, Strategy, Knowledge and Innovation at UN Habitat, said three million people moved to towns and cities every week. Urbanization was a key issue of the 21st century. World Habitat Day had been marked across the world on 5 October, while a global observance event from Indonesia had started the previous day and was continuing today with participation of various stakeholders

from around the world. Some 95 per cent of COVID-19 cases were detected in cities and towns, said Ms. Knudsen; the most vulnerable people in urban slums were hit the hardest. Housing had always been the key issue for UN Habitat; in the times of COVID-19, adequate housing was a matter of life and death. Without a home, there was little hope of protection. Solutions started in cities, and it was hoped that “Urban October” with its 300 events in more than 50 countries would highlight some of the possible solutions and emphasize the role of local communities in dealing with the pandemic.

UN Habitat had done a long series of live digital events with local leaders so they could learn from each other in real time. Being able to get into granular data at the local level was of critical importance and another area of focus for UN Habitat, explained Ms. Knudsen.

Human rights in Iran

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the High Commissioner had expressed deep concern at the deteriorating situation of human rights defenders, lawyers and political prisoners held in Iran’s prisons and called on the authorities to release them given the danger presented by COVID-19.

Iran was the country most affected by COVID-19 in the region, and its prison system suffered from chronic overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions. Starting in February, the Iranian judiciary had issued several directives on temporary releases of prisoners to reduce the spread of the virus. According to official figures, some 120,000 inmates had been released as a result. However, more recently, prisoners had been required to return in large numbers.

Mr. Colville emphasized that States were responsible for the physical and mental health of everyone in their care, including everyone deprived of their liberty. People detained solely for their political views or other forms of activism in support of human rights should not be imprisoned at all. One of the most emblematic cases was that of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who had received a combined sentence of over 30 years in prison on charges related to her human rights work. OHCHR believed that her life was at considerable risk as she suffered from a heart condition and had been weakened by a long hunger strike. The High Commissioner was urging the authorities to release her immediately.

Responding to questions, Mr. Colville said that, back in June, there had been an estimated 211,000 prisoners in Iran, including those temporarily released. It was difficult to provide more clarity at the moment.

OHCHR’s press release is available [here](#).

COVID-19 crisis at sea

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), referred to a [joint statement](#) by the OHCHR, the UN Global Compact and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, which addressed the hidden crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of ship crew members and other workers stranded at sea for many months because of COVID-19.

In all, some 400,000 people were currently stranded on vessels, and a similar number were prevented from returning to ships, either to earn their living or to return home, due to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and transit. In some cases, people had been trapped on the same ship for 17 months or longer, far beyond the maximum 11 months permitted under international labour standards. Similar conditions had been affecting people working in the fishing industry and on offshore oil and gas platforms. Such conditions were having a profoundly negative impact on basic human rights, stressed Mr. Colville.

The joint statement called on relevant business enterprises to identify the impacts of the pandemic, and of governments’ response to it, on the human rights of seafarers and other marine personnel and to actively use their leverage to mitigate those impacts as much as possible. It welcomed the efforts undertaken by some companies to address the unparalleled crisis facing maritime workers and appeals to other business

enterprises to do the same, noting that the UN Guiding Principles provided the blueprint for this urgently needed engagement from the world's business community.

Updates from the World Meteorological Organization

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), stated that the ozone hole over the Antarctic was one of the largest and deepest in recent years. The 2020 ozone hole had grown rapidly from mid-August and peaked at around 24 million square kilometres in early October, covering most of the Antarctic continent.

There was much variability in how far ozone hole events developed each year, but the situation confirmed that there was no room for complacency in enforcing the Montreal Protocol banning emissions of ozone depleting chemicals. This was being driven by a strong, stable and cold polar vortex which was keeping the temperature of the ozone layer over Antarctica below the -78°C Polar Stratospheric Cloud (PSC) formation threshold in most parts.

Ms. Nullis turned to the extreme weather in France's southern Alpes-Maritimes department, which was recovering from unprecedented rainfall over the previous weekend, linked to a so-called Mediterranean episode. Storm Alex, which had hit southern United Kingdom and Brittany on the night of 1 to 2 October, had triggered the event. The weather patterns associated with Alex had met over the Alps with warm air coming up from the South, feeding off warm Mediterranean water which had then cooled and formed a stormy-rainy cell above the Alpes-Maritimes area.

The amount of rainfall associated with this episode had been totally exceptional, with up to 500 mm of rain, or the equivalent of three months. Those were rainfall events which would normally only happen once a century; it was now the second time this year, which was a record. This was because a warm atmosphere contained more moisture, which was transformed into heavy rainfall.

Finally, turning to the active hurricane season, Ms. Nullis said that the hurricane Delta had strengthened at a rapid rate in the past 24 hours. Delta was expected to move to the northwest at a quick pace today and tomorrow as it followed on the path of tropical storm Gamma, which was already impacting southern Mexico with heavy rainfall. It seemed reasonable to believe that rapid intensification would continue in the short term and become a major hurricane in about 24 hours, near the Yucatan Peninsula.

Delta was forecast to be the record tenth US land-falling tropical cyclone in a single season. The previous record was nine, in 1916. Areas along the Northern Gulf coast were at risk for impact whilst still dealing with Laura and Sally.

Food situation in Nigeria

Tomson Phiri, for the World Food Programme (WFP), informed that the WFP was expanding its assistance into COVID-19 hotspots in cities in Kano, Abuja and Lagos where lockdowns and movement restrictions had severely affected people's sources of livelihood, creating extreme levels of vulnerability.

The socio-economic fallout of COVID-19 threatened to plunge millions of people into hunger and malnutrition in Nigeria; 1.5 million people needed assistance in Kano alone, an increase of about one million people within six months. Approximately 90 per cent of Nigerians depended on a daily wage to survive. Now with COVID-19, those informal workers had now lost up to 80 per cent of their income. Mr. Phiri stressed that no other country in the world was home to as many extremely poor people as Nigeria. More than 90 million Nigerians lived in extreme poverty. There were fears this number was set to rise by another 10 million this year as a result of the pandemic. This would mean that one in two Nigerians would live in extreme poverty.

All this was happening on top of the well documented issues in the country's north east. A cocktail of conflict in the north-east and COVID-19 could spell a hunger catastrophe for millions of Nigerians living in

that part of the country.

WFP urgently required USD 103 million over the next six months to provide this critical assistance in both conflict- and COVID-19-affected areas. More about WFP's work in Nigeria can be read [here](#).

Dialogue on global digital finance governance

Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), stated that the UNDP, the United Nations Capital Development Fund, the Swiss Development Cooperation, and Kenya Central Bank would be launching on 9 October [the Global Dialogue on Digital Finance Governance](#). The objective of this platform would be to foster a dialogue between regulators, the financial system, development banks and the United Nations to promote innovative governance mechanisms to regulate BigTechs/Fintechs. Background information on governing digital finance could be found here:

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3678518

Aiaze Mitha, Senior Advisor at the UNSG Task Force on Digital Financing of the SDGs and Dialogue, explained that the most important effects of digitalization were driving the emergence of new big tech financial platforms across the world. Those platforms were amassing vast numbers of customers; in the US, Amazon had reached record sales during the COVID-19 pandemic; Apple Pay now counted for five per cent of global card transactions. Those platforms had an increasing impact on sustainable development in developing countries.

Governance of those digital financial platforms ought to take greater account of their impact on the neediest populations, so that their growth could help more inclusive development and have a positive, tangible effect. Currently, their governance was mostly focused on preventing money laundering and financial wrongdoing.

Geneva announcements

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), informed about a new study made jointly with Netcomm Suisse eCommerce Association, in collaboration with the Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and Inveon, on [changes in online shopping behavior during the pandemic](#), which would be released on 8 October. The COVID-19 pandemic had changed online shopping behaviours, according to a survey of about 3,700 consumers in nine emerging and developed economies. More than half of the survey's respondents now not only shopped online more frequently, but also relied more on the internet for news, health-related information and digital entertainment. A Webex seminar on this survey, with an emphasis on Brazil, would be held on 9 October at 2 p.m.

Michele Zaccheo, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that the WHO and UNICEF would jointly hold a virtual press conference on 7 October at 4 p.m. on the first report on [stillbirth estimates](#). Speakers would be Mark Hereward, Associate Director for Data and Analytics, UNICEF; Dr Anshu Banerjee, Director for the Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing, WHO; and Susannah Hopkins, Chair of the International Stillbirth Alliance and Honorary fellow Stillbirth Centre for Research Excellence of the University of Queensland.

On 12 October at 11 a.m., the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) would hold a press conference on the launch of [Human Cost of Disasters Report 2000-2019](#). The hybrid press conference would be addressed by Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and head of UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction; and Debarati Guha-Sapir, Professor, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Catholic University of Louvain.

Finally, Mr. Zaccheo informed that the next Ciné-ONU event would take place on 7 October, at 5 p.m., when an online discussion would take place about the movie "Wake up on Mars" and the impact of migration on mental health. Those interested should send an email to cineonu@un.org for the link to watch the film, and then join the online discussion at bit.ly/3jolioH.