Bi-weekly press briefing - 18 October 2019

18-10-2019 | Press Conferences

Story

Update on the situation in Iraq and northeast Syria

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), read the following statement:

“For the fourth consecutive day, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, has been receiving hundreds of refugees crossing the border into Iraq from northeast Syria. Refugees mainly come from towns in northern Syria - Kobani, Amoda and Qamishly and surrounding villages.

As of this morning, over 1,600 Syrian refugees have been transported from the border areas to Bardarash refugee camp, some 150 kilometres east of Syria-Iraq border. As we speak, there are several hundred people at the border or en route to the camp. The site has been prepped to receive the latest arrivals fleeing the fighting in northern Syria.

Newly arrived refugees told our staff that it took them days to get to the border as they fled amid shelling and fighting. Most of the new arrivals are women, children and elderly. Their general physical condition appears to be good, but some required psychosocial support.

In support of the response led by local authorities, our teams and those of other aid agencies and partners have been working round the clock to transport refugees to Bardarash camp and meet their immediate needs.
Family tents are being pitched to provide shelter, water and sanitation systems have been put in place together with other basic facilities.

Upon arrival, refugees are given hot meals, water, basic aid items including mattresses, blankets, kitchen sets, jerrycans and other items. Medical teams with ambulances and a mobile medical unit are present to provide medical assistance if needed. Our teams are working with partners to provide services needed including psychosocial support and protection services. The refugees are registered using biometric iris-scanning and their specific needs are assessed to determine what kind of assistance they may require.

Meanwhile in Syria, after a week of violence in the country’s northeast, we and our partners have been able so far to provide life-saving assistance to nearly 60,000 newly displaced Syrians as well as to those forced to flee from one camp to another. Nearly 23,000 people have received core relief and winter items in the camps. UNHCR also provided the same assistance to another 35,700 living in collective shelters and host communities.

The UN currently estimates some 166,000 people have been forced to flee their homes over the past seven days. Newly displaced families continue to seek shelter in camps, makeshift sites, communal shelters, with family, friends or acquaintances. Many of them have been displaced multiple times from one area to another in Al-Hassakeh, Tal Tamer and Raqqa.

Where possible, UNHCR teams conduct protection assessments and our response continues. Our protection partners identify those in need of specialized care and attention every day.

Violence has wreaked chaos among civilians, hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Our teams reported story of a child, a 13-year-old boy from Ras-Al-Ain, who ran for his life amid intense fighting and got separated from his parents. He followed the crowds and reached one of the communal shelters in Al-Hassakeh where UNHCR outreach volunteers tirelessly went through communal shelters until they were able to reunite the boy with his family.

Given the new and significant humanitarian needs, UNHCR reiterates its calls for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It is also critical that humanitarian workers are given unfettered humanitarian access to reach those newly displaced and assist them wherever this is required.”

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), read the following statement:

“A polio immunisation campaign that had been planned prior to the escalation in hostilities proceeded with no major incidents. Nearly 65,000 children were vaccinated in Hassakeh governorate, including 1,748 in Al Hol and 740 in Areesheh camps on Wednesday and Thursday.

The Alouk water pumping station in Hassakeh is still non-functional due to the damage on the main power lines, affecting the water supply to over 400,000 people. Deconfliction is needed to allow UNICEF to supply 16,000 litres of fuel on a daily basis to run the backup generators. Over the past six days, only 30 per cent of water needs have been provided through the water network.

UNICEF continues to truck water to Al Hol and Areesheh camps, and to communities and shelters affected by water shortages in Hassakeh and Tal Tamer town. Work is underway to rehabilitate sanitation facilities, set up latrines, de-sludge, and collect garbage at the camps.

Psychosocial support and mine-risk education is being provided at child-friendly spaces in Hassakeh and Ar Raqqa, and we have begun distributing kits containing a set of winter clothes. And we are working with partners to identify and support children who have been separated from their families.

Mobile health teams are also conducting primary health consultations – the main illnesses reported are
diarrheal disease and acute respiratory infections. The teams are also conducting nutrition assessments and providing supplies including high-energy biscuits and micronutrients.”

Tarik Jasarevic, for the World Health Organization (WHO), made the following statement:

“Despite the challenging situation, WHO continues to deliver aid and provide basic services to people in need where access allows. Our staff remain in northeast Syria. However, there is an urgent need to scale up the response.

40 tons of medical supplies were airlifted from Damascus to Al-Qamishly between 15 and 17 October 2019. The items – enough to cover 102,445 treatment and 620 trauma cases – will be distributed to WHO-supported hospitals and health centres in Al-Hasakeh, rural Ar-Raqqa and rural Deir-ez-Zor.

Ras al Ain and Tal Abyad hospitals remain closed, as reported previously.

Tal Tamr hospital has been the main reception point for wounded persons coming from conflict at Ras al Ain. The hospital has struggled to cope with the influx of patients, and patients have been subsequently referred onwards to Al Hasakeh and Qamishly. Surgical teams at the hospital were forced to evacuate briefly on 15 October, but later returned and re-activated emergency services and the operating theatre. The facility is currently functioning mainly as a trauma stabilization point for wounded persons, who are then referred to Al Hasakeh and Qamishly for more complicated medical interventions.

Tal Tamr hospital has been provided with emergency supplies by partners, and additional support is planned.

One ambulance was received by SARC in Hasakeh, bringing the number of ambulances there to seven.”

Hervé Verhoosel, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that WFP had been distributing food to all the refugees arriving at Bardarash camp, namely immediate response rations, which lasted for three days, and family food rations, which lasted for one month. It was also arranging the provision of ad hoc support via mobile money transfer and would be distributing SIM cards accordingly.

Mr. Verhoosel also read the following statement:

“WFP is on the ground in northeast Syria, and so far has reached 170,000 people with monthly food assistance, including ready-to-eat food to support people in collective shelters and with General Food Assistance, where areas with a high concentration of Internally Displaced Persons [IDPs] have been prioritized.

There are more than 165,000 people on the move in the northeast, seeking shelter in Hasakeh and Raqqa cities. Many people choose to stay with family and friends rather than in collective shelters, so that figure could be higher.

It’s estimated that in terms of IDPs, 70 per cent in Hasakeh are in host families, and 50 per cent in Raqqa; the rest are in collective or temporary shelters. These figures are not statistic given the current fluidity of the situation.

New collective shelters continue to be opened rapidly, and WFP through its cooperating partners is working to identify, assess and respond to the needs of people there, and to avoid any potential gap in the assistance.

Now WFP has revised its distribution plan for monthly food assistance to target the areas hosting the highest numbers of IDPs as a first phase, followed by the distribution in less IDP crowded areas in the second phase to reach those who were already food insecure in the area.
As part of this revised distribution plan, WFP is scaling up its response to support 580,000 people in northeast Syria in October.

Hostilities threaten the movement of humanitarian and commercial supplies that can negatively affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Reports show that disruption in commercial routes had an upward impact on prices.

WFP calls for vital supply routes be kept open and safe for humanitarian deliveries. All parties to the conflict must ensure unconditional, unimpeded and continuous access to all people in need across Syria.

WFP currently has in stock general food assistance rations sufficient for over 500,000 people, and ready-to-eat rations sufficient for 132,000 people either in stock or in transit to northeast Syria. Production of further stocks of ready-to-eat food is ongoing.”

Asked to comment on reports that Turkish forces might have used chemical weapons in the Syrian town of Sari Kani, Mr. Jasarevic said that he had no specific information to provide at that time.

In response to a question from a journalist, Ms. Mercado said that, although a technical team had been able to carry out some repairs, the Alouk water pumping station remained non-functional owing to damage to main power lines.

Mr. Verhoosel, responding to a different question, said that the crisis in northeast Syria had not, for the time being, caused any major disruption to the distribution of supplies by WFP in Idlib province.

Asked to react to allegations that armed groups linked to the Turkish forces had used white phosphorus in munitions, Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, said that, while the Special Envoy was not in a position to comment on the allegations, he was extremely alarmed by the humanitarian consequences of the crisis and had called for a cessation of hostilities.

In response to further questions, Mr. Mahé said that the United Nations estimate of 166,000 displaced persons in northeast Syria was the most recent estimate and covered the period since fighting had begun on 9 October 2019. The previous night, 734 Syrian refugees had entered Iraq, in addition to the 1,600 who had already been transported from the border areas to Bardarash refugee camp.

Mr. Verhoosel said that WFP had enough stock to provide food assistance to more than 630,000 people for five days. Most of the internally displaced persons in northeast Syria were staying with host families, which made them harder to count, but meant that they often had access to cooking facilities and were thus not reliant on emergency food assistance.

Responding to a question from a journalist, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that, despite the announcement of a ceasefire in northeast Syria the previous day, shelling and intermittent clashes had been reported as recently as that morning around Ras-Al-Ain. He did not have details of those responsible for opening fire.

Asked whether UNHCR intended to cooperate with plans announced by Turkey to establish a “safe zone” for up to 2 million Syrian refugees, Mr. Mahé said that UNHCR had not received specific proposals from any party to the conflict. The settled position of UNHCR was that any repatriation of refugees had to be voluntary, safe and dignified.

In response to a different question, Ravina Shamdasani, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that she was not currently in a position to comment on videos circulating on social media that appeared to show violations being committed against Kurds, allegedly by Turkish-backed militias. She also said that, to her knowledge, OHCHR had not received an
Ecuador

Ravina Shamdasani, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following statement:

“A team of three from the UN Human Rights Office is due to visit Ecuador from 20 October to 8 November to look into allegations of human rights violations and abuses committed in the country in the context of the recent protests.

The mission will be conducted at the invitation of the Government of Ecuador.

During their visit, the team will seek to meet with Government officials, indigenous leaders, civil society representatives, journalists and other stakeholders to collect first-hand information on the circumstances of the violence that spread across the country from 3 October.

Our Office has received allegations of human rights violations committed by state security forces, as well as reports of crimes committed by third parties.

We call on the authorities to conduct a prompt, effective, transparent, independent and impartial investigation into all human rights violations and abuses committed in the context of the protests.

We are also concerned about reports of arrests in Ecuador – including of political actors and elected officials – in relation to recent protests in the country. We call on authorities to ensure the full respect of due process guarantees and relevant immunities.

We welcome all parties’ willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue and we encourage the Government of Ecuador and indigenous organizations to continue working towards a peaceful solution to the pressing challenges facing the country.”

In response to questions from a journalist, Ms. Shamdasani said that, following the planned conclusion of the visit to Ecuador on 8 November 2019, the OHCHR team would return to Geneva and report its findings to the High Commissioner. Depending on the nature of those findings, OHCHR would then decide whether to make them public. According to the National Human Rights Institution of Ecuador, more than 1,100 people had been arrested in connection with the recent protests, the majority of whom have since been freed. OHCHR had not received information on any charges brought against protesters, she said.

Egypt

Ravina Shamdasani, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following statement:

“As you may recall, in September, the High Commissioner expressed serious concerns about the widespread arrests that had been taking place in Egypt during and after a series of protests in the country highlighting a range of socioeconomic issues. Unfortunately, such arrests are continuing, and have included a number of well-known and respected civil society figures. The following are some such cases:

On 12 October, plainclothes security officers arrested Esraa Abdelfattah, a journalist and prominent human rights defender, in Cairo. Ms. Abdelfattah was taken to an undisclosed place, where she was reportedly beaten because she refused to unlock her mobile phone. She was then allegedly forced to stand facing a wall for seven hours, after her phone was unlocked through enforced use of her fingers or thumb, enabling the
Two weeks earlier, on 29 September, security forces arrested Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent blogger and human rights defender, as he fulfilled his probation conditions by reporting to the Dokki police station in Cairo. Allegedly, prison officers blindfolded Mr. Abdel Fattah, forced him to strip down to his underwear and walk down a prison corridor while being struck on his back and neck. Prior to his arrest, Mr. Abdel Fattah had served a five-year prison sentence for organizing a protest without permission. He has been serving probation by having to spend each night in a police cell since his conditional release in March 2019.

Later the same day, on 29 September, Mr. Abdel Fattah’s lawyer Mohammed El-Baqer – a well-known human rights lawyer and director of the Adalah Center for Rights and Freedoms – was also arrested while attending the interrogation of his client Mr. Abdel Fattah at the State Security Prosecution. Since his arrest, he has allegedly been on occasion subjected to physical and verbal abuse, denied access to drinking water and sanitation, as well as medical assistance.

Mr. Abdel Fattah and Mr. El-Baqer have both been accused of the following: “belonging to a terrorist group”; “funding a terrorist group”; “spreading false news undermining national security”; and “using social media to commit publishing offenses”. On 9 October 2019, the detention of both men, who are being held at Tora Maximum Security Prison, was renewed for an additional 15 days.

These are by no means the only such cases – simply three of the most prominent ones.

Once again, we remind the Egyptian Government that under international law people have a right to protest peacefully, and a right to express their opinions, including on social media. They should never be arrested, detained – let alone charged with serious offences such as terrorism – simply for exercising those rights. The actions of the authorities at all levels – police, intelligence services, prosecutors and judiciary – should be in line with international norms and standards regarding the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as due process and fair trial, including the right to legal assistance and not to be compelled to incriminate oneself.

All those arrested and detained solely for exercising their rights, or lending legal assistance to others who have been arrested, should be released immediately.

We also remind Egypt of its obligations under international law to respect and protect the right of a person not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This is a non-derogable right. We call on the Egyptian authorities to promptly and effectively investigate any allegations of torture or ill-treatment in detention and to take effective legislative, administrative, judicial or other measures to prevent such acts.”

Responding to questions from journalists, Ms. Shamdasani recalled that, on 27 September 2019, OHCHR had issued a press release in which it had noted that, according to Egyptian civil society organizations, more than 2,000 people had been detained before, during and after the series of protests that had taken place in the country. That figure had been contested by the Government, and could change as the situation evolved.

**Floods in Maban, South Sudan**

Andrei Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), read the following statement:

“Unprecedented heavy flooding in South Sudan’s Maban County has affected nearly 200,000 people, including refugees and host population.
Situated in the Upper Nile State, the affected area is home to more than 150,000 refugees from Sudan.

South Sudan is on a gradual path to recovery from six years of civil war and now faces flooding that the region has not witnessed in almost four decades.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, working with its partners and the local authorities is rushing emergency support. People are seeking safety from the flood waters wherever they find dry land, mostly on small islands as unprecedented water levels have submerged vast areas.

The area, near Maban’s capital town of Bunj, is prone to flooding this time of year because of heavy seasonal rains. However, flooding rivers in South Sudan come from the highlands in the neighbouring Ethiopia, where rainfall is becoming more intense and irregular, is also carving its way through neighbourhoods in broad, swift rivers.

The most recent precipitation data for west Ethiopia shows above average rainfall over the past 90 days, increasing markedly since late September. The data indicates that over the last 30 days, over 230 per cent of the normal amount of rainfall has fallen there, with an estimated 425 mm falling compared with the average just less than 200 mm. This is more than double the average rainfall in the past four weeks.

The affected population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance. People have fled their homes, carrying their belongings and seen gathering together on little islands of dry ground. Flood waters have submerged major roads, making access to the refugee camps difficult for humanitarians. Schools in the region also remain closed.

The floods have also impacted access to public services, including hospitals and damaged sanitation facilities, increasing health risks. We remain concerned that the flooding may increase the risks and spread of diseases. South Sudan was recently declared cholera free last year with the fears that the deadly disease could make a comeback.

Emergency shelter, food, water and sanitation remain the main needs for refugees and locals. As an immediate response, UNHCR has pre-positioned emergency shelter kits and material assistance to help more than 5,000 affected families/some 25,000 people to rebuild and repair damaged shelter, but more support is needed.

Currently, South Sudan hosts almost 300,000 refugees mainly from Sudan’s Blue Nile and South Kordofan. An additional nearly 1.5 million are internally displaced inside the country.”

**Farm slaves rescued in Ukraine**

Joel Millman, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), read the following statement:

“On EU Anti-Trafficking Day, 18 October, the Ministry of Social Policy and the National Police of Ukraine revealed the details of a shocking case of mass trafficking during a press conference in the capital Kyiv. The International Organization for Migration is helping the Government to provide immediate assistance to the victims.

Over 80 jobless Ukrainians from the Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk regions were lured to work at a farm by promises of free accommodation and meals, as well as salaries of USD 170 per month (well below the average salary in Ukraine which is equal to USD 400).

“Two suspects have been apprehended – a man and a woman who were recruiting victims and supervising their work. We are working to prosecute the rest of the criminal group,” said Artem Kryshchenko, the Head of Counter-Trafficking Department of the National Police of Ukraine at the press conference.
“The Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine as the National Counter-Trafficking Coordinator is working to provide the victims with official status, assess their needs and give them psychosocial, medical and financial assistance in partnership with civil society and international organizations,” said Serhii Nizhynskyi, Deputy Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine.

This week IOM provided food, hygiene items and clothing to 22 people among the case victims – those who were recruited in Dnipropetrovsk Region and returned to their homes with the help of the authorities.

From January to June 2019, the IOM Mission in Ukraine identified and assisted 600 victims of trafficking. Almost 70 per cent of them were men. The total number of trafficking survivors assisted by IOM since the start of its reintegration activities in Ukraine 19 years ago is close to 16,000. IOM has been also supporting the Ukrainian State and non-governmental organizations in building their capacity to raise public awareness, assist the victims and prosecute the criminals.

One victim lived in a village in the south of Ukraine with no work available in the district. She needed money for surgery on her arm, so when a friend told her about a job opportunity with an agricultural enterprise in the Odesa region, she decided to take it despite her poor health condition. She had to work in the field and at a canning plant.

The working day started at 7 a.m. and lasted until late evening. Living conditions were extremely poor. The food provided by the employer was insufficient and of a low quality, so she started having more health problems.

For six months she received no salary – the woman who was supervising the workers said everything they earned was spent on their food. The workers were under guard 24/7, and those who tried to escape from the fields were caught and beaten.”

**2019 Global Migration Film Festival**

Joel Millman, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said that Emmy-award winning British actress and activist against human trafficking, Julia Ormond, and Egyptian actor, writer and film producer, and goodwill ambassador for IOM, Asser Yassin had added their marquee names and expertise in migration, film-making and visual storytelling to IOM’s 2019 Global Migration Film Festival. IOM had launched the first Festival in 2016 with just 30 film submissions. The 2018 Festival had taken place in 100 countries, where there had been 545 screenings before a total of 30,000 people. In 2019, over 600 films had been submitted for acceptance by the Festival. The films would go through a rigorous screening and selection process by the Festival jury to select the finalists for the Festival. Ormond and Yassin would be joined by other distinguished members of the jurors’ panel, including Senegalese documentary film-maker and educator Fatou Kandé Senghor and Egyptian film director Sherif Elbendary.

**Geneva announcements**

Michele Zaccheo, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights would close its sixty-sixth session that afternoon and issue its concluding observations on the reports of the six countries that it had reviewed during the session: Denmark, Ecuador, Israel, Senegal, Slovakia and Switzerland.

Mr. Zaccheo also said that the Human Rights Committee would conclude its review of the report of the Czech Republic that morning, having begun the previous afternoon. That afternoon, it would examine its draft general comment on article 21 of the Covenant, on the right to peaceful assembly.

Mr. Zaccheo further said that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women would open its seventy-fourth session on the morning of Monday, 21 October. During the session, it would review
Press conferences

Tarik Jasarevic, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that a press briefing would be held with the Emergency Committee for Ebola virus disease in the Democratic Republic of the Congo at 7 p.m. that evening, 18 October 2019, at which the Director-General of WHO would be advised on whether the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo continued to constitute a public health emergency of international concern.

Wednesday, 23 October 2019 at 10 a.m. in Room III
UNHCR/IOM

With the number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants now at 4.5 million, the Joint Special Representative Eduardo Stein will give an update on the situation, outlining the challenges and needs for the coming months. In addition, he and Ambassador Stevens, Head of the EU Delegation to the UN in Geneva, will explain the scope and aims of the International Solidarity Conference on the Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis, organized by the EU, UNHCR and IOM in Brussels on 28 and 29 October.

Speakers:
- Eduardo Stein, Joint UNHCR and IOM Special Representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants
- Ambassador Walter Stevens, Head of the EU Delegation to the UN in Geneva

reports from Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lithuania and Seychelles.