



UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 16 February 2021

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Story

Pledging conference for Yemen

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that the aid agencies operating in Yemen were doing so in 2020 with half as much money as they had in 2019 and had had to halt or scale back some programmes, even as a famine loomed. The requirements were being finalized for the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan, which would likely be at 2019 levels, or \$4.2 billion. A virtual pledging conference to address the funding crisis would be convened by the UN, co-hosted by the governments of Sweden and Switzerland, on 1 March, from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Geneva time, and would include remarks by the Secretary-General, representatives of the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland, and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, as well as announcement of pledges from Member States. A press conference at 7.10 p.m. Geneva time would be with ERC Lowcock and Ministers representing the co-hosting governments. Questions for the press panel should be sent in advance until 5 p.m. on 1 March.

In response to questions by journalists, Mr. Laerke said that the issue with the previous year's pledging conference was not that pledges had not materialized but that they had been insufficient to begin with. Agencies were engaged in fundraising year-round and did not rely solely on pledging conferences. On another question he said that Mr. Lowcock would indeed be stepping down but would remain in his post until a successor was appointed, a process that was in the hands of the Secretary-General.

Armed atrocities in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Babar Baloch, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that UNHCR was alarmed at ongoing atrocities carried out by armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, which had become part of a systematic pattern to disrupt civilians' lives, instil fear and create havoc. More than 2,000 civilians had been killed in the three eastern provinces in 2020, most of the attacks having been attributed to armed groups. The killings and kidnappings had continued in North Kivu in 2021, including during an incursion into a site for forcibly displaced people. There had been reports of armed groups forcibly occupying schools and homes, prohibiting school activities, attacking health

centres and introducing illegal taxes displaced people could not afford to pay. In one area, the armed group had imposed a 7 p.m. curfew, after which its militants visited homes to extort “security” payments. Armed groups carried out the attacks on the suspicion that civilians were collaborating with other groups or the Congolese security forces. Some of the sites were under threat from multiple armed groups, and civilians found themselves trapped in the middle of confrontations between different groups. UNHCR called on all actors to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of displacement sites and advocated for swift, independent investigations into the crimes to prevent impunity.

The full statement is available [here](#).

Replying to questions, Mr. Baloch said that UNHCR only knew of a few of the armed groups and that the latter were exploiting gaps in security forces coverage.

New Ebola outbreaks in Africa

Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that there were two ongoing Ebola outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the twelfth and thirteenth. The previous outbreak, in Équateur Province, had been declared over in November 2020. In this new outbreak in North Kivu, there were four confirmed cases, including two fatalities. Nearly 300 contacts were being followed in four health zones, and vaccination had begun, including for health-care personnel. The two therapeutics that had proven very effective in the last outbreak were being transported from Kinshasa so that confirmed patients could receive treatment *in loco*.

On 14 February, the Ministry of Health of Guinea had informed WHO of a family cluster of Ebola cases stemming from the burial of a relative, a nurse, on 1 February. However, with the expertise and experience built during the previous outbreak, health teams in Guinea were moving quickly to trace the path of the virus and curb further infections. There were seven cases, including three confirmed and the rest probable. There were also three deaths. 115 people who had been in contact with the known cases had been identified.

In order to prevent the spread of the disease, it was critical to roll out a strategic response plan early, to decentralize operations to the lowest level using local workers, to ensure community ownership of operations and to integrate innovation and research into the response. One-size-fits-all approaches did not work.

The outbreaks were a telling reminder that COVID-19 was not the only health threat on the African continent. While much of its attention was on the pandemic, WHO continued to respond to other health emergencies.

In response to journalists, Ms. Harris said that the huge outbreak in 2014–2016 had initially begun in Guinea, moving very rapidly and silently, chiefly because it was an area with no previous experience of the disease. In the current outbreak, both countries now had considerable experience and were acting quickly to identify and respond to cases, with WHO support. WHO was sequencing the virus in both areas to understand whether the resurgence was due to latent cases or to new animal-to-human transmission. Indeed, the security situation in North Kivu added a layer of complexity to the response, but WHO had experience in the area and was applying the lessons learned about community engagement.

Ms. Harris explained that WHO did not as yet have the scientific data on how effective the Ebola vaccine was in the long-term. Decisions to conduct large-scale preventive vaccination campaigns were decided at the country level and were conditioned by supply. Moreover, the vaccine used during the previous outbreak had been experimental and had only recently been formally approved. Currently, the vaccine was administered in reaction to confirmed cases. Any recent delays in access were largely due to the need to recommission the ultra-cold chain at all levels. Given the parallel Ebola and COVID-19 situations, considerable funds would be needed, including for preparedness measures in neighbouring countries. Taking steps to prevent both viruses remained critical.

COVID-19

In relation to questions on COVID-19, Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the report of the recent WHO mission to Wuhan, China, and associated press conference would hopefully take place within the week.

The Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) on immunization had issued a [framework](#) to assist authorities in prioritizing vaccine distribution.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that 224 United Nations Secretariat staff in Geneva had tested positive for COVID-19 since March 2020.

Geneva announcements

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that the new B2C E-commerce Index for 2020 would be published on 17 February, at 7 a.m. Geneva time. No press conference was planned in that connection.

Ms. Huissoud also announced that the Technology and Innovation Report, published every two years, would be presented at a press conference held by the Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics, Shamika Sirimanne, and the Acting Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Isabelle Durant, on 22 February, at 2.30 p.m. **[later the press conference was moved to Tuesday, 23 February at 3 p.m.]** The new report argued that new and frontier technologies could be used to stimulate recovery from the health crisis and reduce inequalities. It would focus on the impact of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data, 5G and nanotechnology. The report would be under embargo until Thursday, 25 February, at 7 a.m. Geneva time.

Anne Sophia Fisher, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), said that ILO Director-General Guy Ryder would hold a virtual press conference on 22 February, at 10 a.m. GMT, to launch the World Economic and Social Outlook 2021 (the time of the conference could be moved to avoid overlapping with other events, as requested by the journalists). The report explored the role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work and the impact of that on employers and workers, as well as regulatory gaps. The report drew on the findings of ILO surveys conducting among 12,000 workers in 100 countries and representatives of 70 businesses. The report would be under embargo until 1 p.m. GMT.

Tomson Phiri, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that new footage would be released later that day, showing the increasing food insecurity in South Sudan, where 60 per cent of the population faced hunger due to chronic sporadic violence, which was now compounded by COVID-19. WFP was especially concerned about the situation in hard to reach areas.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service on behalf of the Human Rights Council, said that the President of the Council, Ambassador Nazhat Shameem Khan of Fiji would hold a hybrid press conference on the forty-sixth regular session of the Human Rights Council on Wednesday, 17 February, at 10 a.m.

Ms. Vellucci also said that the Conference on disarmament would hold a public plenary meeting that morning at 10 a.m., the first under the presidency of Ambassador Gonçalo de Barros Carvalho e Mello Mourão of Brazil.

She announced that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which had opened its seventy-eighth session on 15 February, would meet in public on 18 February, at 3 p.m., to have a dialogue with representatives of civil society and on 22 February to consider the periodic report of Denmark.

She also announced that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which had opened its sixty-ninth session on 15 February, will begin its consideration of the periodic report of Finland on 17 February and would also review Latvia at the current virtual session.

Ms. Vellucci further said that the United Nations Environment Assembly would be held online for the first time, on 22–23 February. Ahead of the Assembly, the UN Secretary-General and the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme would launch a new report called “Making peace with Nature” at a virtual press conference on 18 February, at 5 p.m. The report laid out the gravity of environmental emergencies through a unique synthesis of findings from major global assessments. It flagged the interlinkages between environmental and development challenges and described the roles of all parts of society in the transformations needed for a sustainable future. Journalists could register to participate in the press conference, and also to take part in the Environment Assembly.

She recalled that the Secretary-General was expected to participate in the Munich Security Conference on 19 February.

Lastly, Ms. Vellucci drew attention to the programme of events marking International Mother Language Day on 19 February, including the screening via WebEx of “Colours of the Alphabet”, a documentary on language and childhood in Africa. The screening would be preceded by remarks by UNOG Director-General Valovaya and film director and producer Alastair Cole and Nick Higgins. An online quiz on mother languages would be available until 21 February. The detailed programme would be distributed to the journalists.