Bi-weekly press briefing - 22 October 2019

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Story

Refugee arrivals in Iraq

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

“A week after the first refugees crossed from north-east Syria into Iraq, the arrivals to northern Iraq continue. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, teams on the ground report that, as of this morning, more than 7,100 have arrived since last Monday. Most of them - just under 7,000 - are sheltered at the Bardarash refugee camp, some 140 kilometres east of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Most of the Syrian refugees come from cities and villages from the north-east of Syria. Three out of four are women and children. There are unaccompanied children among the arrivals. Some refugees, especially children, require psychosocial first aid and psychosocial support, as they fled in fear in the midst of fighting. Some witnessed explosions and shelling. Refugees with relatives living in the area are allowed to leave the camp and join their families.

UNHCR and partners, together with local authorities, are providing a range of services that start from the border. These include reception, provision of hot meals, transportation to the camp, registration, shelter and protection services. Teams also conduct protection monitoring, child protection and identification of unaccompanied children and persons with specific needs, already at border reception centres.
The Bardarash camp has a water network, an electricity grid and a sewage system. These networks need expansion as more refugees arrive at the camp. The camp has a reception centre, a registration centre and storage units for humanitarian supplies. UNHCR partner, the local Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs, is in charge of camp management.

Prior to the latest arrivals, some 228,000 Syrian refugees have found shelter in Iraq, forced from their homes by more than eight years of conflict and destruction in Syria.

Responding to questions from journalists, Mr. Mahecic said the number of Syrian refugees in Iraq had been fairly stable for many years. The new refugees had been coming into the country at a rate of between 700 and 1,000 per day since Monday 14 October, most of them arriving at relatively remote crossing places, from where they were being transported to the Bardarash camp. Some of them had left the camp to join relatives living in the area; all those who remained in the camp could come and go as they wished.

Syria

In answer to questions from journalists, Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said the Al-Hol refugee camp in the Syrian Arab Republic was currently home to about 68,000 persons. Most of them were Iraqis, others were Syrian displaced persons and there were also some third country nationals.

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, answering journalists’ questions, said the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir Pedersen, would provide the Geneva press corps with an update on the situation before the forthcoming meeting of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva on 30 October 2019.

Launch of the 2019 Review of Maritime Transport

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said UNCTAD was about to publish the 2019 edition of its Review of Maritime Transport, which would examine how world maritime trade had fared in 2018 in the face of difficult-to-navigate trends, such as heightened global uncertainty, escalating tariff tensions between the United States of America and China, the climate change challenge for sustainable shipping and structural changes within the industry. The Review would cover the five mainstream areas of maritime transport: maritime freight, world fleet, rates and markets, ports and the regulatory and legal framework. It would place a special focus on trade and transport in developing countries and, additionally, would highlight the expanding debate on concerns such as technological developments, including automation and maritime connectivity, monitoring of competition issues and the environment. The Review, under embargo until 6 p.m. on 30 October 2019, would be presented at a press conference at 10.30 a.m. on Monday 28 October.

Ms. Huissoud added that she had taken the present opportunity to speak in French because, for financial reasons, the forthcoming press release would be available only in English, and that situation was likely to continue.

Beijing+25 Review for UNECE region

Thomas Croll-Knight, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), read the following statement:

“Over 700 key stakeholders – including the Deputy Prime-Ministers of Kyrgyzstan and North Macedonia, together with several Ministers and national heads of gender equality, human rights and related areas from over 15 countries - will gather in Geneva on 29 and 30 October for the Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting for the UNECE Region, jointly organized with UN-Women. This will be a chance to assess
progress made on the commitments of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most visionary agenda for gender equality and women’s rights, adopted almost 25 years ago, and to link this to the 2030 Agenda, and specifically, SDG5 on gender equality.

Today, not a single country in the UNECE Region – which covers Europe, North America, the Caucasus and Central Asia – has achieved full gender equality. The report on key trends on gender equality that will be discussed at the Meeting found that gaps between women and men in the region have narrowed, but progress is only at a snail’s pace. Women continue to work more and earn less, remain underrepresented in positions of leadership and are more likely to experience sexual violence than men.

**Gender Pay Gap**

The gender pay gap persists across the region. Differences in hourly wage rates varies from 4% in Romania to 34% in Armenia.

**Education**

In 39 out of the 47 UNECE countries with data, more than 55 per cent of higher education graduates are women. Yet gender-stereotyped subject choices persist: women remain a minority among Information and Communications Technology (ICT) students, with percentages ranging from 11% in Belgium to 33% in Greece.

**Political participation**

Across the region, only 16 countries have more than 30% women in their parliaments. Women are in a minority in local governments across the region.

There are similar trends in respect of employment and violence.

To help address key barriers to gender equality, the Meeting will provide a forum for countries to exchange experiences and learn from national strategies and policies that have contributed to women’s empowerment and gender equality. This will draw on national reports prepared by 51 UNECE member States.

The Meeting will be chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic and the State Secretary of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland. A Regional Civil Society Forum on 28 October will prepare recommendations that will be presented in the opening of the Review Meeting. The Review itself will be opened by UNICE Executive Secretary Olga Algayerova and UN-Women Deputy Executive Secretary Åsa Regnér.

The outcomes of the five-yearly Regional Review Meeting will feed into the 2020 Global Beijing+25 Review at the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The Review Meeting will include eight thematic sessions focussing on areas of specific concern for the UNECE region:

- Key trends on gender equality across the UNECE region
- Closing the gender gaps: effective economic and social policies in the UNECE region
- Ending violence against women and girls: lessons and solutions from the region
- Education for gender equality: a powerful tool for transformation
- Smart investments: financing for gender equality
- 30 October:
  - Women in leadership: women’s representation in policy- and decision-making
  - Acting for climate: empowering women to build climate resilience
- Global Goals and the Beijing Commitments
Side events will focus on key policy issues, including ageing and its implications for gender equality and effective gender mainstreaming methods.”

Mr. Croll-Knight added that the high-level participants at the meeting would include deputy prime ministers from two countries, ministers from four countries and heads of agencies dealing with gender equality and human rights from across the region.

In answer to journalists’ questions, Mr. Croll-Knight said the report to be discussed at the Meeting, together with country-specific reports, was available online. Countries in the eastern part of the European Region had the largest gender gaps and it was hoped that the showcasing of successful initiatives from the European Union countries and North America would be of interest to them.

**Somalia: internally displaced persons and refugees**

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

“Somalia has for almost three decades been in the throes of conflict; now add the most recent drought and the result is displacement and food shortages.

There are reports of urgent need for assistance among the most affected regions, such as Baidoa.

In the first half of the year, forced displacement in Somalia was primarily due to insecurity, drought and floods, and currently a total of 2.6 million people remain displaced within the country.

Following the declaration of a severe drought in the Horn of Africa region, aid agencies, in collaboration with the Government of Somalia, launched a Drought Impact Response Plan in June.

Of the 15 million people living in Somalia, 5.4 million (about 30%) were estimated to be food insecure with 2.2 million of these in severe acute food insecurity conditions.

More than half of the population lives in poverty with the highest poverty rates found in displacement settlements, with affected populations mainly coming from Lower Shabelle, Bakool, Bay and Sanaag and heading towards Middle Shabelle and Banadir.

Baidoa, the capital of Bay region, hosts one of the largest internally displaced person (IDP) populations in Somalia. According to figures compiled by the international community, as of September 2019, Baidoa had 359,994 IDPs, consisting of 51,322 households on 435 sites.

Ali Ahmed, an IOM field officer in Baidoa said: “We have new arrivals here coming every day, every week...The biggest gap for the new arrivals is food, water and shelter – that is the main challenge.”

IOM’s Chief of Mission in Somalia Dyane Epstein said: “The needs are immense, and IOM is working together with the government, communities, and international partners to provide the much-needed support, ensuring their basic needs are met.”

In all, the East and Horn of Africa region had 8.1 million IDPs and 3.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers as of June.

Largely due to prolonged conflict, Somalia also has a considerable refugee population abroad, nearly 900,000, according to UNHCR’s Global Trends Report issued in June 2019. The majority were staying in Kenya (34.7 per cent), Ethiopia (26.4 per cent) and Yemen (34 per cent), in addition to 6 per cent hosted by other countries.
Somalia itself hosted 17,000 refugees and asylum-seekers who were mainly settled in Woqooyi Galbeed, Bari and Banadir. Mainly from Ethiopia, Yemen and other countries, including Syria, Tanzania and Eritrea.

**High Mountain Summit**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that rising global temperatures were causing unprecedented changes in the environments of high mountain regions. The mountain cryosphere - glaciers, snow, and permafrost - and high-altitude mountain ecosystems, which provided and regulated freshwater resources for around half of the world’s population, now faced severe pressure as a result of climate change and ongoing changes in the distribution of precipitation. That, in turn, increased the risk of natural hazards, with cascading and often devastating effects for populations and economies in mountain regions and downstream, including in densely populated lowland areas.

In view of the challenges, the World Meteorological Organization and a wide array of partners were convening a High Mountain Summit from 29 to 31 October. It would seek to identify priority actions on policy, science, observations, and services to address the challenges of climate changes and support sustainable development and disaster risk reduction in mountain and downstream regions. The Summit, which would be webcast, would take place at WMO’s Geneva headquarters and bring together more than 150 participants from all around the globe.

The opening address of the Summit, on 29 October, would be given by Alain Berset, head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs of Switzerland, which was seeing dramatic glacier retreat and threats to its vital winter tourism industry as a result of rising temperatures.

The thematic sessions would be followed by a concluding high-level segment which would adopt a call for action. The co-chairs of the Summit would be Carolina Adler, Executive Director, Mountain Research Initiative, and John Pomeroy, Canada Research Chair in Water Resources and Climate Change, both of whom would be available for interview. Organizations and agencies from China, other parts of the Himalayas and a number of African countries, all of which were suffering from the changes in high mountain ecosystems, would be represented.

**WMO calls for protection of radio frequencies vital to weather forecasts**

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said WMO was calling on governments to protect the radio frequencies allocated to Earth observation services which were vital for weather forecasts and long-term climate change monitoring.

Decisions with major repercussions for Earth exploration, environmental monitoring and meteorological satellite operation would be made at the World Radiocommunication Conference 2019, to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, from 28 October to 22 November 2019. The Conference, held every three to four years under the auspices of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), reviewed the Radio Regulations which governed the use of radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits. It would consider the management of scarce orbit/spectrum resources.

There was growing alarm in the meteorological community that increasing competition for bandwidths, including from the next-generation mobile phone data service, 5G, might be to the detriment of established applications relating to Earth observation satellites, radiosondes, aircraft, radar and other observing systems. While WMO did not wish to hamper the roll-out of new telecommunications technologies such as 5G, it was concerned that they should not encroach on the frequencies used by life-saving applications such as weather protection.

**WHO signs Memorandum of Understanding with International Generic and Biosimilar Medicines Association**
Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, would today sign a memorandum of understanding with the International Generic and Biosimilar Medicines Association. The new agreement was an important step in WHO’s drive towards universal health coverage by providing quality generics medicines, which offered a tried and tested way to even out inequities in access to affordable, quality health products. The vast majority of the products on the WHO Essential Medicines List were generic.

**World Air Quality Conference**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that, on 11 October 2019, approximately one year after the First WHO Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health, 35 mayors of major global cities, including London, had signed the C40 Clean Air Cities Declaration. On 23 October, London Mayor Sadiq Khan was convening the World Air Quality Conference, where he would launch a report showing how London could achieve WHO air quality targets by 2030.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, would endorse the high-profile commitment and reiterate that cities can, and must, take action to tackle the critical threat of air pollution to the climate and health. Air pollution was the world’s single largest environmental health risk, leading to 7 million deaths each year. London was one of the world’s first megacities to commit to achieving WHO air quality guidelines by 2030. Cities could and must tackle the critical threat of air pollution to the climate and health. Investments in cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing, power generation, industry and better municipal waste management could effectively reduce key sources of ambient air pollution.

**World Polio Day**

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said it was anticipated that, on 24 October, the Global Commission for the Certification of Poliomyelitis Eradication (GCC) would officially certify that wild poliovirus type 3 (WPV3) had been globally eradicated. It would be the second of the three types of wild poliovirus to be eradicated. Only wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) remained in circulation, in border areas of just two countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Global WPV3 certification was a tremendous achievement and an important milestone on the road to eradicate all poliovirus strains. The GCC met every six months, to independently evaluate the global poliovirus epidemiology.

Africa had not detected any wild poliovirus of any type since September 2016, and the entire African Region was eligible to be certified free of all wild poliovirus as early as 2020. The last case of WPV3 dated to November 2012, from Nigeria, which showed that the tactics were working, as individual family lines of the virus were being successfully knocked out. However, the job was not finished until all strains of poliovirus were fully eradicated, and stayed eradicated. Final success must be achieved or the world would face the consequences of a renewed global resurgence of that ancient scourge. The remaining strains of WPV1 must be eradicated, and the increasing circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV) outbreaks, in particular in Africa, must be addressed. WPV2 had not been detected since 1999 (in India), and had been certified by the GCC as eradicated in 2015.

In answer to questions from journalists, Mr. Lindmeier said the celebrations would take place throughout the day on Thursday 24 October, with the official ceremony to be held at 3 p.m. in the WHO Executive Board Room.

**Alleged use of white phosphorus in northern Syria**

Responding to questions from journalists, Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said WHO was closely monitoring the situation in the conflict in the northern Syrian Arab Republic but there were no indications that there were more victims of burns than occurred in similar conflict situations. No information was available on the specific causes of the burns that had been reported.
United Nations Day

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said the United Nations would celebrate its seventy-fourth anniversary on United Nations Day, 24 October. He read out a message from the Secretary-General marking the occasion:

“United Nations Day highlights the enduring ideals of the Charter, adopted on this date 74 years ago.

Amid stormy global seas, the Charter remains our shared moral anchor. At this time of turbo-charged change, the United Nations remains focused on the real problems of real people.

We are working for a fair globalization and bold climate action. We are pushing for human rights and gender equality — and saying “no” to hatred of any kind. And we are striving to maintain peace – while bringing life-saving aid to millions caught up in armed conflict.

Next year marks the Organization’s 75th anniversary. This milestone is a critical moment to shape our future, together.”

Mr. Leblanc added that a press release would be issued later in the afternoon, under embargo, announcing the launch on Thursday 24 October of a new worldwide initiative.

Geneva announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that, contrary to what had initially been planned, the Human Rights Committee had not proceeded yesterday afternoon and this morning to the review of the report of Central African Republic, which was postponed sine die. So this morning, the Committee was continuing the examination of its general comment on the right to peaceful assembly, and this afternoon, it would begin consideration of the report of Cabo Verde, as scheduled. During the current session, it would also review the reports of Senegal, Belgium and Czechia.

Mr. LeBlanc also said that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was reviewing today the report of Iraq. During the current session, it would review the reports of Iraq, Andorra, Kazakhstan, the Seychelles, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lithuania.

Press conferences

Wednesday, 23 October 2019 at 10:00 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