



Bi-weekly press briefing: 25 October 2019

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Story

Syria

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), said that, in a few days, the Constitutional Committee would be convened in Geneva. In the afternoon of Friday, 25 October, the Special Envoy would meet with the Small Group. There would be a press conference on Monday, 28 October, at 2 p.m., which would be broadcast live. A formal ceremony involving 150 Syrians was expected to take place on Wednesday, 30 October. The two co-chairs had been named: Ahmad Kuzbari for the Government and Hadi AlBahra for the opposition. The list of Committee members would be released the following week.

Refugee influx into Iraq

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

“Teams from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in northern Iraq report that last night more than 900 Syrian refugees arrived at the Bardarash camp on 45 buses, bringing the camp population to nearly 9,700.

So far more than 10,100 Syrian refugees have crossed into Iraq seeking safety. Nearly 75% of all registered refugees are women and children. More than a quarter of refugee families are female-headed households. Arrivals also include unaccompanied children.

UNHCR and partners continue to provide life-saving assistance to them.

UNHCR stresses the importance of freedom of movement for fleeing civilians and that the borders remain open so that refugees can seek safety and protection. UNHCR and other humanitarian partners are working with authorities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and are committed to supporting their response to the latest refugee influx.

Bardarash camp, in Dohuk governorate, is ready to receive up to 11,000 people. Other nearby sites have been identified to shelter more refugees. We are grateful for the response of the local authorities, especially those of Dohuk Governorate, for receiving and assisting the newly arrived Syrian refugees, in addition to more than 230,000 already there.

Many new arrivals need psycho-social support, children and adults alike. Last week at Bardarash camp, our psycho-social support team came across Dilwar, a three-year-old boy. He was in tears as he got lost from his mother upon arrival to the camp. Even after being reunited with his mum, Dilwar continued crying. She explained that Dilwar experienced loud explosions as they were fleeing their home. This made him agitated and sad and he could not stop crying. Our team attended to Dilwar, worked with him and their efforts were ultimately rewarded with a smile.

Meanwhile in Syria, some 180,000 people have been displaced across the country's north-east according to the latest UN estimates. The majority of the displaced are women and children.

As part of inter-agency response inside Syria, UNHCR is providing emergency aid and protection services to thousands of people to ensure as much safety and dignity as possible for displaced families.

Those who fled their homes are seeking safety in collective shelters and with family and friends. To date, more than 75,000 newly displaced people in host communities, collective shelters and camps have received relief items through the network of UNHCR partners on the ground. This includes winter jackets, high thermal blankets and sleeping bags to ensure that families are protected from the cold.

UNHCR teams are currently assessing and repairing collective shelters in Hassakeh city. Where possible, they are connecting these shelters to the electrical grid to improve the living conditions and to mitigate the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Teams are also installing water tanks and conducting basic repairs to ensure people can have safe drinking water.

UNHCR, together with its national legal partner Syrian Arab Red Crescent is on the ground providing immediate legal support to the displaced families. So far, legal counselling for hundreds in collective shelters have taken place. This includes registration of newly born babies who also received their birth certificates.

UNHCR estimates its initial additional funding needs inside Syria at US\$31.5 million within the existing appeal for Syria (HRP).

Responding to questions from journalists, Mr. Mahecic, for UNHCR, said that, since around 14 October, around 1,000 migrants had arrived per day on average. The rate of the influx had initially been slower. Earlier that morning, a further 1,114 people had arrived. The refugees were received in remote areas before

being taken to camps, which were located around 150 to 170 km east of the border.

Responding to a question on Lebanon, Mr. Mahecic, for UNHCR, said that he had not received information indicating that the situation in the country was affecting refugees.

Cyclone Kenneth

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

“Cyclone Kenneth made landfall in northern Mozambique on 25 April with winds over 200km/hour and caused extensive damage in Cabo Delgado and Nampula Provinces to homes, infrastructure and agricultural land.

Cyclone Kenneth arrived just six weeks after Cyclone Idai had made landfall in central Mozambique in March; according to the Government of Mozambique’s Disaster Management Institute (INGC) Cyclone Kenneth affected over 280,000 people.

Since Cyclone Kenneth made landfall, IOM and its partners have assisted over 200,000 affected individuals (more than 40,000 households) with various shelter and non-food items.

Yesterday (24/10) IOM provided over 400 households in Chipene Village with relief kits, including a tarp, rope, bucket, water container and kitchen set. In the upcoming week over 3,600 families in Memba District will receive relief kits, funded by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and by the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

According to the most recent IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix report on displacement following Cyclone Kenneth, 24,036 displaced people are currently tracked (across five accommodation centres, one transitional centre, and with host communities) to assess needs and gaps, in support of the humanitarian community and in close coordination with the Government of Mozambique.”

Truck tragedy in the United Kingdom

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

“Reports emerged on 23 October that the remains of 39 people were found inside a refrigerated lorry container parked at an industrial park in Essex, England. A police investigation was launched to conduct enquiries into these tragic deaths and piece together the circumstances of this incident. Eight of the deceased are women and 31 are men, and all are believed to be Chinese nationals. Initial police reports indicate that the trailer travelled from Zeebrugge, Belgium to the port of Purfleet in Essex on Wednesday, 23 October.”

Mr. Millman said the discovery did not necessarily indicate a major shift in migration patterns. It was the simply the regrettable outcome of a situation in which many criminal groups were involved.

Responding to questions on the identity of the people whose bodies had been found, Mr. Millman said IOM could not confirm that they were migrants. IOM could not rule out the possibility that the people had been legal residents of the United Kingdom, but it seemed unlikely under the circumstances.

Responding to a question on the route that the migrants had taken, Mr. Millman said it was not clear at what stage the migrants had entered the truck. It was common for migrants to travel from the south to the north of Europe. It was not known what percentage of migrants who entered the Balkans had the United Kingdom as their intended destination.

Migrant deaths in Europe

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

“Along the Western Balkans route, several deaths were documented during the past weeks, as people made their way across Bosnia and Herzegovina to reach western Europe. On 30 September, a man drowned in the Korana river, in Cazin, Una-Sana canton. The remains of a man were found in Biléca, near border with Montenegro, on 5 October.

Just a few days later, a young man was shot by a local resident when he was spending the night with a group of migrants in a village in Cazin, Una-Sana canton, on 9 October. Additionally, a death was recorded in North Macedonia on 12 October, when a 16-year-old Afghan boy died from the injuries sustained while travelling on top of a freight train. He was hospitalized in the town of Gevgelija after being found severely injured near railway tracks on 1 October. Unfortunately, he did not recover from his injuries and passed away at the hospital 11 days later.

At least 24 people have died on the Western Balkans route so far this year: eight deaths took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, six in Serbia, five in Croatia, three in North Macedonia and two in Slovenia. There were 41 deaths documented along this route in 2018.”

Mr. Millman said a factsheet containing information on the specific routes used by migrants attempting to reach Europe and data on those who had been returned had been distributed in the meeting room. In recent weeks, there had been a spike in arrivals to Greece from Turkey. In fact, for that route, 10 of the busiest days of 2019 had occurred between the last few days of August and 1 October. There had only been one day during the year, 26 September, on which the number of arrivals had exceeded 800 people. By way of comparison, the busiest day ever recorded for that route had been 22 October 2015, with 8,292 people.

Protests and unrest around the world

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

“Current or very recent protests, some of which we will talk about today, include ones taking place in Bolivia, Chile, Hong Kong, Ecuador, Egypt, Guinea, Haiti, Iraq and Lebanon. And of course we have also seen major protests taking place earlier in the year in Algeria, Honduras, Nicaragua, Malawi, Russia, Sudan and Zimbabwe, as well as in a number of EU countries, including France, Spain and the UK. And this list is far from exhaustive.

Of course the reasons behind these protests are complex and varied, and it is important not to come to sweeping conclusions. There are common threads among many of the protests: populations that are fed up and angry, especially with socio-economic conditions, corruption, inequalities and the general widening gap between rich and poor.

These sentiments are exacerbated by growing mistrust of institutions of government, politicians and ruling elites. Some protests have been triggered by one or two specific developments, and have then metamorphosed into expressions of deep public dissatisfaction on a whole range of issues spanning the political, social and economic spectrum.

Some have been fanned by poor government responses or by excessive use of force against the initial protestors, which have brought tens of thousands more people onto the streets in solidarity with those who have been killed, injured or arrested by security forces who in many cases have failed to abide by international standards governing use of force, and tried to obstruct fundamental human rights such as freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and freedom of expression.”

Responding to questions, Ms. Shamdasani, for OHCHR, said that, although it was difficult to identify a common solution to the various protests that were currently taking place, or had recently taken place, the

first step should be dialogue. It was important that the problems that people in society were facing could be discussed in a genuine, meaningful and inclusive way. In some countries, protests that had started peacefully had become violent as a result of a lack of a response or a repressive response on the part of national authorities. OHCHR called on States to draw a distinction between peaceful protestors and those who used violence. In some cases, the use of force by national authorities could be considered excessive.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said the current wave of protests showed that there was much that remained to be done to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, which constituted a road map for governments, the private sector, NGOs and other stakeholders to reduce poverty, create decent working conditions and develop the tools to improve people's lives. At a major summit that had been held during the first week of the General Assembly, the concern had been expressed that the world might not meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The Secretary-General had called upon the international community to step up its efforts in that regard.

Responding to further questions, Ms. Shamdasani, for OHCHR, said it was too soon to draw broad conclusions about the links between the protests currently taking place around the world. However, the protests in several countries concerned socioeconomic rights and a sense among many that they had been short-changed by their government and that people's day-to-day struggles were not being recognized.

Protests in Bolivia

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

“We are concerned by reports of violence and excessive use of force in Bolivia following the elections last Sunday.

The uncertainty surrounding the results have triggered protests in several cities across the country, which have resulted in clashes between opposing groups, and between protesters and security forces. We have reports of police using force against protesters, including with tear gas, in a manner that may violate basic principles on the use of force.

According to the Special Force to Combat Crime, at least 80 people have been detained and 19 police officers have been injured during clashes. Preliminary data from the Ministry of Interior indicates that at least eight civilians have been injured in the context of confrontations.

We remind the authorities that the use of force during demonstrations should only be applied in exceptional circumstances, in accordance with applicable international norms and standards, including the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality. All allegations of misconduct by security forces or acts of violence, should be investigated in a prompt thorough, independent and impartial manner.

We urge demonstrators to express their grievances peacefully, without resort or incitement to violence.

We remind the authorities of their obligation to respect the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and to distinguish between violent actors and peaceful demonstrators.

We call on all actors, including political leaders and their followers, to exercise restraint in order to reduce tensions, and to urgently engage in a genuine and meaningful dialogue to address their political disagreement. Otherwise, there is a serious risk the situation will spiral out of control.”

Protests in Iraq

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

read the following statement:

“The main protests in Iraq began on 1 October when young people frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities, lack of services, corruption and failures of government took to the streets.

Violence during the demonstrations, which continued until 9 October, caused at least 157 deaths and injured 5,494 people. A UN human rights report released by UNAMI on Tuesday (22 October), set out credible reports of violations of the right to life, including deliberate killings of unarmed protesters and the excessive use of force by units deployed to manage the demonstrations. The report also highlights concerns regarding the widespread use of repressive measures to limit publicly available information on the demonstrations as well as allegations of arbitrary arrests, threats and harassment. And it also called on all demonstrators to exercise their right to assembly in peaceful and non-violent ways, in keeping with the law.

The Government also issued its own Investigative Report on 22 October, and we urge it to act on the calls for accountability for perpetrators contained in both reports.

Large protests are expected in Iraq today, and indeed were already underway late yesterday. We urge calm on all sides, and in particular a carefully calibrated and proportionate response by security forces in full accordance with international standards, so the terrible toll of life and property during the protests at the beginning of the month are not repeated. We are also concerned with the continued blocking of social media and intermittent blocking of the internet.”

Protests in Chile

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

“We have been closely monitoring the mounting crisis in Chile, including reports of human rights violations and abuses in the context of the recent protests and the declaration of a state of emergency. Our Office has received allegations of violations of international norms and standards relating to the use of force by State security forces. We have also received reports of crimes committed by third parties.

The High Commissioner has thus decided to deploy a team of three human rights officers to the country from 28 October to 22 November to examine the allegations, meet with various actors and gather information on measures taken by the Government to address the situation. The mission team will be based in Santiago, but will be visiting cities throughout the country.

A number of parliamentarians have expressed their desire for the UN Human Rights Office to send a mission to the country, and the Government has extended its invitation as well.

During the visit, the team will seek to meet with Government officials, civil society representatives, victims, the National Human Rights Institution and other stakeholders to collect first-hand information on the events. In conjunction with our Regional Office in South America, the team will also look into the root causes of the protests, including issues relating to the enjoyment of economic and social rights in Chile.”

Responding to questions, Ms. Shamdasani said a group of parliamentarians had sent a request to the High Commissioner to deploy a mission to the country. The previous day, the Government of Chile had also extended an invitation to OHCHR. Such initiatives always worked best with the engagement of the national authorities of the country concerned. The High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, was a national of Chile, but her Office had a global mandate. In the past, there had been many occasions on which previous High Commissioners had been compelled by circumstances in their country of origin to speak out and engage. The Government of Chile was fully on board.

Responding to a request for more detailed statistics, Ms. Shamdasani said OHCHR had received reports that 18 people had died, including a 4-year-old child. The circumstances of those deaths were unclear. OHCHR had also received reports that 582 people had been wounded, 295 of whom had been wounded by live ammunition. The national human rights institution had been following those cases closely. It had indicated that, in at least five of those deaths, there had been involvement on the part of the security forces. OHCHR would look into those reports during its mission.

Protests in Guinea

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

“Our Office in Guinea has been following the protests that began in the country on 14 October and has engaged with the authorities, including on reports that at least nine people died and dozens more were injured during last week’s protests, and that security forces have failed to comply with international norms and standards on the use of force when policing demonstrations. The Office has also followed the cases of leaders of the Front National pour la Defense de la Constitution (FNDC) who were arrested on 12 October in connection with the protest.

We are encouraged by the Government’s announcement of an investigation into killings and allegations of excessive use of force and call on them to ensure that investigations are prompt, thorough, impartial and conducted with a view to bring justice to the victims of human rights violations and abuses.

We are also concerned about the large number of detentions and call for the immediate release of all those detained for the exercise of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. We remind authorities that no one should be convicted for the exercise of their right to promote inclusive participation in public affairs and to freedom of expression.

Yesterday’s mass protest in Conakry was reported to have taken place peacefully without any resort to the use of force by the authorities. We call on the Government to enable an inclusive and meaningful dialogue, to ensure that the right to political participation, freedom of peaceful assembly and expression are fully respected and protected. We also call on all Guineans to claim their rights without resort to violence.

Our office in Guinea will continue its engagement with the authorities, political leaders and civil society organizations to assist in preventing and addressing contentious issues through a human rights-based approach.”

Protests in Lebanon

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

“Lebanon has been experiencing its biggest spontaneous protests in over a decade, which have continued despite the package of reforms announced by the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic. Tens of thousands of peaceful protestors from all walks of life and confessions continue to unleash anger across the country against what they perceive to be decades of corruption and government mismanagement.

By and large, the conduct of security forces has been proportionate except during the night of 19 October when the UN human rights office in Beirut documented over 100 cases of detention and ill-treatment. We understand most or all of the detainees have since been released. The Government has said it will continue to provide protection for peaceful demonstrators, while taking appropriate action against possible instigators of violence. The situation has been complicated by sporadic confrontations between protestors and politically motivated counter-protestors.

Between 17 and 24 October, four people were reportedly killed, and hundreds of injured people have been treated by the Lebanese Red Cross.

We are concerned about the dismissal of the General Manager of the National News Agency in Lebanon reportedly for covering the protests in the country. And we are looking into other cases of dismissal of employees for exercising their right to peaceful assembly.

We continue to monitor the unfolding events and we have reminded the Government of the inalienable rights of people to assemble and protest freely and peacefully, and of the need to restrict use of force to the greatest extent possible.”

Julian Assange

Responding to a question on the conditions in which Julian Assange was being detained, Ravina Shamdasani, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said several special procedures mandate holders had been following Mr. Assange’s case closely. They included the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

Zambia

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), read the following statement:

“In support of the Government-led response in Zambia, the UN and our partners have launched a 7-months Humanitarian Response Plan to address rising humanitarian needs triggered by the poorest rainfall season since 1981 in the southern part of the country.

The failed rains have hit food production hard in Zambia. At national level, there has been a decline in maize production - a staple food - of about 16 per cent. The decrease in maize production has been so severe that the country, normally a net cereal exporter, put a ban on maize exports.

More than 2.4 million people out of total population of some 17 million are expected to be severely food insecure during the lean season from this October till March 2020. At least 430,000 people are expected to be in Emergency levels (IPC 4), according to the latest Zambia Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZVAC) / IPC report.

The 2019 Vulnerability Assessment has also revealed an increase in severe acute malnutrition levels. Acute malnutrition, which leads to wasting in children, stands at nearly 6 per cent across the nine provinces of Zambia. The highest levels of wasting were registered in three districts of the Western Province, where it ranged from 21 to 33 per cent.

In response to this crisis, the UN and international NGOs are seeking nearly US\$90 million to provide immediate humanitarian assistance and early recovery support for 2.3 million people for seven months.

The Humanitarian Response Plan complements the Government’s own Recovery Action Plan which aims to provide life-saving and early recovery support to 2.3 million people in need over the next 12 months. The Government has mobilized \$36.7 million against its own plan, but has requested the support of international partners to fill the funding gap.”

Syria Humanitarian Response Plan

Responding to a question on the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the Plan required USD 3.3 billion for 2019. So far,

USD 1.48 billion, or 45 per cent of the total, had been received. The largest donor by far was the Government of the United States of America, with well over USD 0.5 billion. It was followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, the European Commission, Norway, Japan and Denmark.

WHO announcements

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said the WHO Digital Health Technical Advisory Group would meet at 3 p.m. on Friday, 25 October. There would be a virtual press briefing in connection with the event.

Mr. Lindmeier said that, on the same day, WHO would publish a study linking high rates of unintended pregnancies to gaps in family-planning services.

Global Polio Eradication Initiative

Christian Lindmeier, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said the previous day, Thursday, 24 October, had been World Polio Day. WHO had celebrated the eradication of one strain of polio and had announced that other cases of vaccine-derived polio had been identified in the Philippines.

Oliver Rosenbauer, for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, WHO, said that, the previous day, the WHO Director-General had announced that wild poliovirus type 3 had been globally eradicated. There were several different strains of poliovirus. Although they were symptomatically identical, in that they all induced paralysis or even death in children, they were immunologically and genetically different, which meant that they had to be eradicated individually. The fact that wild poliovirus type 3 had been eradicated globally was a major milestone. It showed that, where fully implemented, eradication strategies were effective. However, other strains, including poliovirus type 1 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, had yet to be eradicated. There had also been a number of vaccine-derived polio outbreaks in Africa and the Philippines. Polio thus continued to paralyse children. The task of completely eradicating polio would not be complete until all of those strains had been eradicated. The official declaration of the eradication of wild poliovirus type 3 meant that no child would ever again be paralysed by that particular strain.

Responding to questions from journalists, Mr. Rosenbauer, for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, WHO, said the eradication of poliovirus type 3 would not have been possible with the support of a wide range of partners, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rotary International. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative dated back to 1982, when two Rotarians had travelled to the Philippines and had seen children paralysed by polio on the streets of Manila. On their flight back to Evanston, United States of America, they had decided to launch an initiative to combat the disease. The Group of 20 (G20) countries were highly engaged in the process. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative had also begun working with new partners, including Gavi Alliance, which was strengthening routine immunization and introducing new vaccines. It was also important to recognize the work done by vaccinators, who worked in often dangerous conditions to administer the vaccine. In short, the eradication of poliovirus type 3 was a testament to the combined efforts of many partners, and their continued support would be needed to eradicate the remaining strains. In November 2019, the global community would come together for a pledging moment in Abu Dhabi, which would offer an opportunity at which partners could repledge to committing to eradicate the remaining strains.

Responding to further questions from journalists, Mr. Rosenbauer, for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, WHO, said there were three wild strains of poliovirus, of which types 2 and 3 had been eradicated. Wild poliovirus type 1 had yet to be eradicated in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, there were three vaccine-derived strains of poliovirus. Vaccine-derived strains of poliovirus emerged in areas of poor vaccination coverage. Proper vaccination guaranteed protection against all strains of poliovirus. Going forward, efforts should be focused on identifying where and why children were under-immunized. The causes of under-immunization included community resistance, poor planning, undersupply, a lack of

infrastructure and population movements. One of the key challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the scale of population movements. Those two countries shared a long border that 50,000 children crossed every day.

UNU-WIDER annual lecture

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that, in the evening of Wednesday, 30 October, Santiago Levy would deliver the 2019 United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) annual lecture at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. Mr. Levy was the main architect of Progres/Oportunidades, a Mexican incentive-based health, nutrition and education programme for the poor. The lecture was being organized by UNU-WIDER in collaboration with the Graduate Institute's Centre for Finance and Development. The spokespersons for UNU-WIDER had indicated that Mr. Levy would be in Geneva on 29 October and might be available for media opportunities.

Geneva announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that, in the morning of Friday, 25 October, the Human Rights Committee would continue working on its draft general comment No. 37 on article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Right of peaceful assembly). Other public meetings devoted to the draft general comment had been scheduled for the morning of Tuesday, 29 October, the afternoon of Monday, 4 November, and the morning of Thursday 7 November. At the current session, the Committee planned to consider the reports of Belgium, the Central African Republic, Cabo Verde, the Czech Republic, Mexico and Senegal.

Mr. LeBlanc also said that, on Friday, 25 October, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was reviewing the report of Seychelles in Room XVII. At the current session, the Committee planned to consider the reports of Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lithuania and Seychelles.