Bi-weekly press briefing: 29 October 2019

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Story

Syrian Constitutional Committee

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, said the delegations from the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee had arrived in Geneva.

The 150 Committee members included 50 nominated by the Government, 50 nominated by the opposition and 50 forming a middle third. Approximately 30 per cent of the members were women. The Committee marked the first political agreement between the Government and the opposition and a clear acceptance of the other as an interlocutor in the political process, as had been outlined in Security Council resolution 2254. It also created a space for civil society.

The Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Geir O. Pedersen, would hold further meetings on 29 October with the two Co-Chairs, and preparatory meetings separately with the Committee members from the Government, the
Syrian Negotiations Commission and the Middle Third members. No media opportunities would be available for those meetings. The Concordia suite at the Palais des Nations would not be accessible to journalists for security reasons.

The Special Envoy would also be meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran as part of the series of meetings he had been holding with international stakeholders prior to the launch of the Constitutional Committee.

On 30 October, the Special Envoy and the Co-Chairs of the Constitutional Committee, Mr. Ahmad Kuzbari from the Government and Mr. Hadi al-Bahra from the opposition, would launch the start of the Committee’s work in an opening ceremony with the 150 members of the Constitutional Committee. The ceremony was scheduled to begin at 12 p.m. in the Council Chamber with remarks by the Special Envoy and the two Co-Chairs. The ceremony was expected to last approximately one hour and would be open to the press and webcast live on UNTV in English and Arabic, with interpretation. Journalists interested in covering the launch would be screened before entering the Council Chamber. Latecomers would not be admitted.

Answering questions from journalists, Ms. Fenton said the Special Envoy would not be available for press activities on 29 October. For press opportunities with the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran, it was best to approach the respective Permanent Missions in Geneva.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, added that if the Missions decided to hold a press event, the Information Service would communicate that information via the usual channels.

Regarding the members of the Constitutional Committee, Ms. Fenton said the Special Envoy would take the decision regarding the appropriate moment to release the list of names.

Asked to give more details on the specific locations where journalists’ access would be restricted, Mr. LeBlanc said clarification would be provided in due course. The restricted areas would be clearly marked and were being put in place for security reasons. Doors 11 and 21 would be kept open to ensure that visiting journalists not in possession of magnetic badges were able to obtain access to the Palais des Nations.

Ms. Fenton added that journalists were permitted to visit the delegations’ hotels if they were there at the invitation of or with the awareness of one of the delegations and if the Swiss authorities had been notified. The information in the correspondents’ handbook remained accurate.

In response to further questions from journalists, Ms. Fenton said the Task Force on Humanitarian Access usually met on Thursday every three weeks. As its most recent meeting had taken place on 24 October, there were no plans for another meeting to be held on 31 October. The Office of the Special Envoy continued to monitor the humanitarian situation on the ground and to work for a ceasefire and the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. While the Office was currently focusing on moving forward with the Constitutional Committee, other areas of concern also remained a priority.

Asked to comment on the restrictions on press freedom surrounding the first meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said it was necessary to balance press freedom with security considerations. It was important to ensure that the negotiations would be successful without unnecessary obstacles. The United Nations had no control over decisions regarding press access outside its own premises.

Mr. LeBlanc added that the objective of the security measures was not to restrict the freedom of the press. Determinations regarding access to hotels had been made by the local police in Geneva. At the Palais des Nations, although there would be some barriers in place, the Information Service would facilitate as many press opportunities as possible.
Asked about cross-border deliveries of aid to the Idlib area, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said he was not aware of any disruption to the regular routine of around three movements per week.

**UNHCR expanding response in Northern Iraq amid the continuing Syrian refugee influx**

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

“More than 12,000 Syrian refugees have sought shelter in neighbouring Iraq since the latest influx began a fortnight ago, according to teams on the ground. The refugee population at recently opened Bardarash camp has exceeded 11,000 people and more than 800 are now sheltered at Gawilan transit site. Both sites are approximately 150 kilometres east of Syria-Iraq border. UNHCR and the authorities are working on reuniting refugees from the camp with their family members residing in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI).

UNHCR is supporting the response led by the KRI authorities and it is working closely with them to ready other locations, in the event that both sites reach their capacity.

Refugee families at both locations are receiving the same services and humanitarian assistance. These include hot meals, transportation, registration, shelter and protection services.

We are grateful to all those involved in this ongoing humanitarian response, including the KRI authorities and all of our partners, who are working 24/7 to accommodate refugees and provide them with safe shelter, basic services and protection. We have also deployed additional UNHCR staff from our Baghdad office to support our teams in Erbil and Dohuk to respond to the needs of the newly arrived refugees.”

**Continuing restrictions in Indian Administered Kashmir**

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), read the following statement:

“We are extremely concerned that the population of Indian-Administered Kashmir continues to be deprived of a wide range of human rights and we urge the Indian authorities to unlock the situation and fully restore the rights that are currently being denied.

Twelve weeks ago, on 5 August, the Government of India revoked constitutional provisions granting partial autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and announced the creation of two separate federally-administered Union Territories, which will come into effect this Thursday (October 31). At the same time, very restrictive measures were imposed. Although some of these measures have been relaxed, their impact on human rights continues to be widely felt.

The undeclared curfew imposed by the authorities in the region was lifted from much of Jammu and Ladakh regions within a few days, but is reportedly still in place in large parts of the Kashmir Valley, preventing the free movement of people, as well as hampering their ability to exercise their right to peaceful assembly, and restricting their rights to health, education and freedom of religion and belief.

There have been several allegations of excessive use of force including the use of pellet-firing shotguns, tear gas and rubber bullets by security forces during sporadic protests, with unconfirmed reports of at least six civilian killings and scores of serious injuries in separate incidents since 5 August.

We have also received reports of armed groups operating in Indian-Administered Kashmir threatening residents trying to carry out their normal business or attend school, as well as several allegations of violence against people who have not complied with the armed groups’ demands. At least another six people have been killed and over a dozen injured in alleged attacks by armed group members since 5 August.
Hundreds of political and civil society leaders, including three former Chief Ministers of Jammu and Kashmir, have been detained on a preventative basis. While some political workers have reportedly been released, most senior leaders – especially those from the Kashmir Valley – remain in detention.

We have also received a number of allegations of torture and ill-treatment of people held in detention. These must be independently and impartially investigated. Torture is totally and unequivocally prohibited under international law.

While restrictions on landline telephones were eventually lifted, and a state-run telecom company allowed to resume partial mobile phone services, all internet services remain blocked in the Kashmir Valley. Media outlets continue to face undue restrictions, with at least four local journalists allegedly arrested over the past three months.

The Supreme Court of India has been slow to deal with petitions concerning habeas corpus, freedom of movement and media restrictions. The Jammu and Kashmir State Human Rights Commission, the State Information Commission (which implements the right-to-information laws) and the State Commission for Protection of Women and Child Rights are among key institutions that are being wound up, with the new bodies to replace them yet to be established.

Meanwhile, major political decisions about the future status of Jammu and Kashmir have been taken without the consent, deliberation or active and informed participation of the affected population. Their leaders are detained, their capacity to be informed has been badly restricted, and their right to freedom of expression and to political participation has been undermined.”

Asked for more details about the armed groups operating in Indian-controlled areas, Mr. Colville said the activities of those groups had been covered extensively in two reports issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the most recent of which had been published in July 2019.

**Flooding in Horn of Africa from OCHA: Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia**

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

“There has been unusually heavy rainfall across large parts of the Horn of Africa in recent months leading to flooding in Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia.

In Ethiopia, floods are reported across six regions and have displaced 220,000 people and caused loss of property and livelihoods. In total, over half a million people have been affected by the recent floods.

In South Sudan, flooding since July have affected more than 900,000 people including internally displaced people, refugees and the host communities where they live. The rains are likely to continue for another four to six weeks and put more people at risk. We anticipate considerable damage to crops, arable land and livestock. Across the flooded areas more than 3 million people already needed assistance before the rains. Now more than 60 per cent of the flood-affected counties are classified as facing extreme levels of acute malnutrition.

In Somalia, the rains started early this year and the high water levels in Juba and Shabelle rivers have resulted in flooding in Hirshabelle, Jubaland and South West states. In Belet Weyne town, on the border between Somalia and Ethiopia, some 164,000 people have been displaced with most of them settling on higher ground. We have reports of at least three people who have drowned. Farmland, infrastructure and roads have been destroyed, and livelihoods disrupted in some of the worst-hit areas.

In all three countries, humanitarian partners are scaling up the flood response and providing life-saving assistance including food, water, shelter and health care services, but as is often the case, funding is an issue.
In South Sudan, for example, the United Nations and humanitarian partners urgently require US$35 million to increase the response.”

**El Salvador and Central America: huge cost of the double burden of malnutrition**

Hervé Verhoosel, for the World Food Programme (WFP), read the following statement:

“A study released this week, which is the result of a partnership between the World Food Programme, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Government of El Salvador, together with the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama, estimates the losses in productivity, health and education in El Salvador due to the ‘double burden’ of malnutrition and obesity. A similar study will be released later in Guatemala, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

Malnutrition and obesity can occur together in the same countries, communities and even families. This is known as the ‘double burden’ of malnutrition. El Salvador has endured the cost of this double burden for more than a decade, affecting the poor and vulnerable thus becoming another factor in the current inequality in the region.

The report, based on numbers collected in 2017, reveals that the cost of this double burden in El Salvador was over USD $2.5 billion dollars, equivalent to 10.3% of GDP. Of this figure, over USD $1.7 billion correspond to costs due to loss of productivity, over USD $820 million to extra costs in health and US $ 8.7 million to education costs.

Currently, 1 in 6 children have chronic undernutrition and 6 out of 10 adults are overweight or obese, conditions that raise troubling consequences which limit the development of the country.

The study shows other alarming social costs, such as:

• 4 out of 10 children with malnutrition do not finish primary school and 8 out of 10 do not finish high school.

• 1 million Salvadorans suffer from diabetes and hypertension as a result of being overweight or obese, being these conditions the ones that generate the highest cost in health.

• 8 out of every 10 dollars spent in malnutrition are spent on children with low birth weight as a result of malnutrition during pregnancy

The conclusions of this study invite us to see both sides of the same coin, and they are a call to action. We hope the parties interested listen to the warning and strongly drive major and sustained resources to fight malnutrition and promote access to healthy food and to healthy lifestyles.

WFP reiterates the call to the countries to make all the necessary efforts to move towards a new paradigm in the modes of production and consumption, which is key in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.”

In response to questions from journalists, Mr. Verhoosel said the reports on the other Central American countries would be released in the coming days. The World Food Programme was working with the Government to provide technical assistance. It was also working with other United Nations agencies to examine next steps and potential solutions to the problem.

Mr. Verhoosel also announced that at 2 p.m. on 29 October, he would hold an informal press conference in Room I, at which he would provide updates on WFP’s activities in Syria, including the north-east region.
Fact-finding mission to Chile

Asked by journalists to provide an update on the fact-finding mission to Chile, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said some of the four team members had already travelled to the country and the others would arrive there very soon. The mission was a technical one and the team intended to tap into the considerable knowledge and expertise that existed in Chile itself. Its aim was to assess the situation and shape clear recommendations that would help the Chilean people respond to some of the human rights issues that had been highlighted by the current crisis. The final format of the team’s findings had not yet been determined; however, some form of public statement would certainly be made.

Venezuela

Asked to provide an update on the fact-finding mission to Venezuela, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said while the Human Rights Council had requested the immediate formation of a mission, a number of budgetary and staffing aspects first needed to be addressed.

Protests in Iraq

Asked to comment on the ongoing protests in Iraq, Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the OHCHR office in Iraq had recorded a preliminary figure of 72 deaths in the new round of demonstrations that had begun over the weekend, bringing to 229 the total number of people killed in related violence since 1 October. Thousands more had been injured. Staff were attempting to speak to witnesses to establish the circumstances surrounding disturbing reports of events in Karbala.

Mr. Colville added that OHCHR reiterated its call for calm and restraint on all sides and urged the authorities to investigate the use of force, engage in meaningful dialogue to reduce tensions and ensure that protests were handled in line with international human rights law. Two recent reports had recognized that there had been instances of excessive use of force by the authorities.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, recalled that on 28 October, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Iraq, Ms. Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, had condemned the further loss of life over the weekend and reiterated that implementing the many measures announced by the Government in recent weeks would take time. A constructive dialogue on the way forward was in the interests of all.

Geneva announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, recalled that on 29 October, the Human Rights Committee would continue its consideration of its draft general comment on the right of peaceful assembly.

Also on 29 October, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was scheduled to conduct its review of Cambodia. During its seventy-fourth session, the Committee would also review Iraq, Andorra, Kazakhstan, Seychelles, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lithuania.