Bi-weekly press briefing: 1 November 2019

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Story

**Syrian Constitutional Committee and situation in Syria**

Jenifer Fenton, for the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, read the following statement:

“Following Wednesday’s historic opening ceremony, the 150 members of the Syrian Constitutional Committee participated in its first working session Thursday, under the co-chairmanship of two co-chairs from the Government and the Opposition, and with the facilitation of the United Nations.

Yesterday, dozens of Committee members gave opening statements on constitutional visions and suggestions for consideration by the drafting body.

The Constitutional Committee will be at the UN and will continue its deliberations today.”
Asked whether there was a time limit for the Committee to complete its work, Ms. Fenton said the Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, had encouraged Committee members to be patient and persistent, and to engage constructively to fulfil the important mandate that had been entrusted to them. Once the 45 members of the so-called "small group" had been decided, the information would be relayed to journalists. The Special Envoy had made every effort to speak to the media and had given interviews to a wide range of outlets. However, he was not able to accommodate every interview request. She would pass on a request from a journalist for a press conference with the Special Envoy and the two co-chairs of the Committee.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said the Secretary-General had spoken yesterday at the start of the sixth Istanbul Mediation Conference and said that mediation was one of our most important tools to reduce and end conflict. He said the tragedy in Syria was a clear illustration of the importance of political solutions to conflict, adding that Wednesday’s first meeting of the Constitutional Committee was a landmark, but also “in itself a clear success of mediation”. The Secretary-General hoped this would be the first step towards a political solution to end this tragic chapter in the lives of the Syrian people and create the opportunity for all Syrians to return to their places of origin, in safety and in dignity, to end their status as refugees.

The Secretary-General had added that mediation could not wait for a military stalemate or a request for help. Rather, he said, “There is a need for mediation at all stages of the peace continuum, from prevention to peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development, including between parties to protracted conflicts.”

Asked to respond to reports that three health professionals had been executed by pro-Turkish armed groups near the town of Suluk in north-east Syria, Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said he was not aware of the reports and was thus not in a position to comment at that time.

Visit by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

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

“The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, will visit the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 4 to 6 November 2019 to learn first-hand about the humanitarian situation and strengthen cooperation and coordination among the various humanitarian organizations operating in the country.

During the visit, Mr. Lowcock is scheduled to meet with senior government officials and members of the National Assembly, representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies and the diplomatic community, among others. He will also assess the humanitarian response supported by the United Nations on the ground and meet with people affected by the crisis.

In 2018, the UN began to scale up the delivery of humanitarian assistance to respond to the most urgent needs, complementing the actions of national authorities and national and international NGOs. The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan calls for US$ 223 million to assist 2.6 million people and focuses on providing life-saving humanitarian aid and protection, and strengthening community resilience. The plan is currently 23 per cent funded, according to OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service.”

 Asked if Mr. Lowcock would take the opportunity to visit other countries in the region affected by the crisis, Mr. Laerke said the visit would be to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela only, and specifically to sites in or just outside Caracas.

Latest news from South Sudan
Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), read the following statement:

“The International Organization for Migration continues to call for the unconditional release of a female volunteer and a four-year-old child abducted in South Sudan during a gun battle on Sunday morning that claimed the lives of three IOM humanitarian workers.

“There are efforts being made at this time to try to locate the whereabouts of our missing colleague and the child.” IOM South Sudan Chief of Mission Jean-Philippe Chauzy said this morning.

“All possible action is being taken with the goal of trying to get our colleague released from her abductors immediately without any pre-conditions.”

On Sunday, a group of IOM volunteers were caught in the crossfire between two armed groups in Isebi, in Morobo County, in South Sudan’s Central Equatoria region.

In addition to two men and one woman who were killed, two other male volunteers suffered non-life-threatening injuries. The abducted child is the son of the woman who was slain.

IOM’s humanitarians were working in Ebola screening points in border areas between South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, tracking the spread of the deadly disease.

Chauzy and a small team from Juba flew to Yei, the largest town in the area where the incident occurred yesterday, for an emotional meeting with IOM volunteers and colleagues of the deceased, and later the deputy governor.

“It was extremely important to meet with our volunteers, to listen to their concerns, their stories about the people who died. It was raw but I also want them to know that no effort is being spared to ensure their safely and to locate the missing,” Chauzy said.

IOM began operations in southern Sudan in early 2005 and established the IOM South Sudan mission after the country’s independence in July 2011.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in December 2013, IOM has provided support to thousands of host communities, returnees, and internally displaced people including those seeking protection at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan Protection of Civilians sites.”

In response to questions from journalists, Mr. Dillon said the situation in the Central Equatoria region of South Sudan was very fluid, and that every effort was being made to secure the release of the woman and child, and identify their abductors. IOM was part of the United Nations security apparatus in South Sudan, which was engaged in talks with various stakeholders, including government officials. IOM had suspended operations in five areas near the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo until such time as there was clarity on the security situation and a commitment from relevant actors to guarantee the security of IOM staff. He was not able, at that time, to provide details of the contractual relationship between IOM and the volunteers involved in the incident the previous Sunday, or, by extension, of any compensation to which the volunteers’ families might be entitled.

**Missing Migrants Project**

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), read the following statement:

“2019 is the sixth year of IOM’s efforts to systematically record deaths on migration routes worldwide through its Missing Migrants Project. Since the beginning of 2014, the project has recorded the deaths of 33,751 people, including 2,589 in 2019.”
These fatalities are particularly apt today, 1 November, which is observed in Mexico and throughout Latin America as All Saints Day, followed on 2 November by All Souls Day. These “Días de Los Muertos” in recent years have featured remembrances of migrants who have died in pursuit of prosperity and safety. IOM’s Missing Migrants Project has noted that during this year’s observances migrant deaths in the hemisphere are higher than at any time over the six years IOM has been tracking these figures.”

Protests in Haiti

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

“We are deeply concerned about the protracted crisis in Haiti, and its impact on the ability of Haitians to access their basic rights to health care, food, education and other needs.

At least 42 people have died and 86 have been injured as tensions have escalated since the latest round of protests began on 15 September, according to information verified by our Office. The vast majority suffered gunshot wounds. Reports indicate that security forces were responsible for 19 of the deaths while the rest were killed by armed individuals or unknown perpetrators. Among those killed was at least one journalist. Nine other journalists were injured and many have reportedly been threatened. We urge all actors to refrain from targeting journalists and respect the freedom of the media to report on the situation.

Since the beginning of the school year in September, most children across Haiti have been unable to go to school. Roadblocks and violence have meant that people, particularly in regions outside the capital, have had serious difficulty accessing food, drinking water, medicine and fuel. The health sector has been hit particularly hard, with shortages of electricity, fuel, supplies, and the inability of many medical personnel to reach their places of work. We are also concerned about the impact that the closure of judicial institutions and other public institutions is having in the country, especially on vulnerable groups. For example, the alarmingly high number of detainees in prolonged pretrial detention has further increased owing to the closure of many local courts for security reasons.

We urge all parties to avoid hampering the functioning of hospitals and to facilitate access to health care, as well as the delivery, including through humanitarian channels, of food and medicine for individuals in prisons, orphanages and other vulnerable groups such as people living with disabilities.

We welcome the launching of investigations by the General Inspectorate of the Haitian National Police into allegations of human rights violations by police and stress the need for investigations to be thorough, transparent and independent, with a view to ensuring accountability, justice and truth for victims and their families – including through judicial action.

It is crucial that all actors take measures to support and advance peaceful solutions to the many grievances that have led Haitians to take to the streets repeatedly over the past 16 months. We stand ready to support attempts at meaningful and inclusive resolution to the current situation and alleviate the suffering of the people of Haiti.”

Responding to questions from journalists, Ms. Hurtado said the protests had begun 16 months previously and had been sparked by rising fuel prices and allegations of widespread corruption. Since then, there had been episodic outbreaks of violence, with the most recent having started on 15 September 2019. Attempts to establish a dialogue were made difficult by the fact that there were many stakeholders, including armed groups, and that the Government was undergoing a reshuffle. OHCHR had a presence on the ground through the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti, and its staff were in contact with the authorities and other stakeholders. OHCHR was calling for a de-escalation of the violence and a peaceful resolution to the unrest. Almost half of the 352 detainees in the prison in Jérémie in the Grand’Anse department were reported to be in prolonged pretrial detention, and local courts were closed. In late October 2019, two professional
associations of magistrates had urged magistrates to stay at home until their safety could be guaranteed.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, added that the UN and humanitarian partners in Haiti were concerned about the deterioration of humanitarian access in the past six weeks as a result of widespread protests. This was limiting their ability to deliver assistance to Haitians who needed it the most. The humanitarian community was urging all parties to facilitate access to everyone affected by the current crisis so they could receive the assistance they need. Despite the difficult situation, the UN and humanitarian partners had in recent days delivered a one-month supply of fuel, drugs, medical supplies and oxygen tanks to 17 hospitals, providing health care to more than 4.3 million people. The fuel delivered would allow pumping stations to distribute drinking water to more than 400,000 people.

**Indigenous people killings in Colombia**

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

“Earlier this week, we signed a Host Country Agreement with Colombia, which will allow us to remain and operate in the country with our full mandate – including technical cooperation and human rights monitoring and reporting – for a further three years. Over the last 22 years, our Office in Colombia has worked very closely with the Government and various actors, including civil society, on the protection and promotion of human rights, as well as in supporting implementation of the Peace Agreement signed between the Government and the FARC.

One key focus of our Office in Colombia has been on the rights – individual and collective – of indigenous peoples, including their rights to self-determination and to land. Indigenous human rights defenders in particular have long been harassed and subjected to violent attacks for their advocacy.

On Tuesday, 29 October, five indigenous people from the Nasa community were shot dead and six others were severely injured by gunfire while trying to prevent criminal groups from entering their territory. Among them was Cristina Bautista, a Nasa traditional authority (or ‘Neehwesx’). She was also a former UN Human Rights Office indigenous fellow in 2017 and the recipient of a 2019 grant from the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples. She was an inspirational woman deeply dedicated to defending the human rights of indigenous peoples in Colombia.

The massacre took place in Tacueyó in Northern Cauca, in the south-west of the country – a region that has increasingly been plagued by violence, mainly perpetrated by criminal groups against indigenous peoples who try to prevent them from entering and operating in their ancestral territories.

So far this year, our Office in Colombia has documented 52 killings in the Nasa territory in Northern Cauca region. Of these 52 individuals, 11 were human rights defenders. In addition, members of the Nasa community have received 74 death threats, and nine have been physically attacked. In total, our Office in Colombia has received reports of 106 killings of human rights defenders so far in 2019.

The Nasa community has repeatedly raised the alarm with the authorities about threats to their safety. Despite efforts by successive Colombian governments, indigenous peoples continue to face great risks, especially religious or community leaders like Cristina Bautista.

The UN Human Rights Office stresses once again the urgent need for effective protection and preventive measures for indigenous peoples across the country, and particularly in the Northern Cauca region, in line with their right to land and their right to self-determination, as recognized by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We call on the authorities to establish a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the
29 October killings in Northern Cauca, including into possible failures on the part of the authorities that may have allowed the massacre to happen. We also urge the authorities to break the cycle of impunity relating to threats, harassment and killings targeting indigenous peoples. We urge the Government to respond to this dramatic situation in a comprehensive and consultative manner, and not simply through increased military presence.

We remind the Government that any preventive and protection measures taken which affect indigenous peoples should be agreed with their own authorities, in full accordance with their traditions and customary practices, autonomy and jurisdiction.”

Asked to give a breakdown of the 106 reported killings of human rights defenders in 2019, Ms. Hurtado said the individuals concerned had been activists for various causes. In response to further questions, she said the perpetrators of violent attacks against human rights defenders included former guerrillas and current and former paramilitary members, many of whom appeared to be acting as hired assassins with no political agenda. There were allegations, but no firm evidence, that some perpetrators had links to large multinational mining companies. She had no information on the alleged murders of five further individuals in the Northern Cauca region on 31 October 2019, but the recent killings showed that indigenous peoples in Colombia were not being granted effective protection in practice. There were reports of omissions and collusion by the authorities, with security forces allegedly allowing criminal gangs to operate freely in the Northern Cauca region. Following the 29 October killings, the President of Colombia, Iván Duque Márquez, had announced that he would deploy 2,400 troops to the region. However, representatives of the Nasa community had stated that militarization was not the answer. OHCHR was calling for the views of indigenous peoples to be heard and for a mutually acceptable arrangement to be found.

**Indigenous people killings in Peru**

In response to a question from a journalist, Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said she was not in a position to comment on the news, published on 31 October 2019, that prosecutors in Peru had charged five men with the 2014 murders of four indigenous activists, including indigenous leader Edwin Chota.

**Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Asked to comment on the situation in north-east Democratic Republic of Congo and on the specific case of Furaha Asani, an academic with a Congolese passport who faced deportation to the country from the United Kingdom despite never having been there, Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said she had no information to hand on either matter, but would convey the queries to her colleagues. Responding to a further question, she said she could not confirm reports that the High Commissioner planned to visit the Democratic Republic of Congo in early 2020.

**OHCHR mission to Chile**

In response to questions from a journalist, Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said a team of human rights officers deployed by the High Commissioner had arrived in Chile during the course of the week and had begun to hold meetings with the authorities and other stakeholders. The team would investigate allegations of human rights violations and excessive use of force by State security forces, and would visit a number of cities in different regions of the country. The team’s itinerary was confidential, but there were plans to issue a public statement at the end of the mission, which was scheduled for 22 November 2019, though that date could change. The format of the statement, and of the recommendations that the team intended to draw up, had not yet been decided.

**Freedom of the press**
Asked to give her thoughts, in the context of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, on remarks made the previous day by the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in which he had criticized certain media outlets for their coverage of the failed operation to capture Ovidio Guzmán, Marta Hurtado, for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the right to freedom of expression was a fundamental right, and that the work of journalists should be respected and promoted.

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, reminded journalists that the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists was celebrated on 2 November. On this occasion, the Secretary-General of the United Nations had issued the following message:

“Freedom of expression and free media are essential to fostering understanding, bolstering democracy and advancing our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

In recent years, however, there has been a rise in the scale and number of attacks against the physical safety of journalists and media workers, and of incidents infringing upon their ability to do their vital work, including threats of prosecution, arrest, imprisonment, denial of journalistic access and failures to investigate and prosecute crimes against them.

The proportion of women among fatalities has also risen, and women journalists increasingly face gendered forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, sexual assault and threats.

When journalists are targeted, societies as a whole pay a price. Without the ability to protect journalists, our ability to remain informed and contribute to decision-making is severely hampered. Without journalists able to do their jobs in safety, we face the prospect of a world of confusion and disinformation.

On this International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, let us stand up together for journalists, for truth and for justice.”

Asked to comment on whether political leaders who vilified journalists as purveyors of fake news should be urged to tone down their language in the interests of journalists’ safety, Mr. LeBlanc said the freedoms of expression and the press were essential components of democracy that had to be respected, and that all persons had a duty to refrain from inflammatory discourse. Asked to provide a list of all the journalists confirmed to have been killed in 2019, he drew attention to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s observatory of killed journalists.

United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25)

Asked to provide information on the venue for the United Nations Climate Change Conference, Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that matter was in the hands of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UN had reportedly received an offer from Spain to host the Conference in Madrid. In any case, there were indications that Chile would retain the presidency of the Conference despite no longer hosting it, which would not be an unprecedented occurrence. To his knowledge, the United Nations Office at Geneva had not received an official request from UNFCCC to host the Conference. [The UNFCCC announced in the afternoon that COP25 would take place from 2-13 December in Madrid, Spain].

Publication of a technical paper on the effects of US tariffs

Catherine Huissoud, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said a technical paper on the effects of US tariffs on China’s imports to the US, consumers in the US and the diversion effects would be released under embargo on the afternoon or evening of Monday, 4 November 2019. Further information, including figures, would be presented at a press conference on either Tuesday, 5
November at 2 p.m. or Thursday, 7 November at 11 a.m.

**Forest Week (4-7 November)**

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), read the following statement:

“The joint 77th session of the UNECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry (COFFI) and the 40th session of the FAO European Forestry Commission (EFC) will be held from 4 to 7 November 2019 at the Palais des Nations (Room XII).

It coincides with Forêt2019, the 5th European Forest Week, which will be celebrated throughout Europe under the theme "Forests and the Circular Economy".

Europe’s forests – an important economic sector…

Forest activities in Europe have a turnover of almost €500 billion, employing approximately 3.5 million people.

… which is key to mitigate climate change

Forests are the most important terrestrial storage of carbon dioxide. Europe’s 400 billion trees currently absorb almost 9 per cent of the continent’s greenhouse gas emissions. Wood products continue to store this carbon during their lifetime.

The circular economy aims to use materials and services efficiently to ensure that “the value of products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible, and the generation of waste is minimized” (European Union, 2015).

While it is important that the circular economy does not rely substantially on fossil-based and non-renewable materials with a high environmental footprint, it is equally important that the increased production of bio-based products does not compete with food production and does not have a negative impact on ecosystems, and the climate.

The key role of forests in a circular economy is the provision of biodegradable raw material that can be used to create, reusable and recyclable bio-materials in strategic sectors of the economy such as construction and manufacturing (e.g. automotive, home and IT appliances, textiles, packaging etc.).

The most illustrative examples of the emerging forest-based value chains are: wood-based construction (tallest wood building in Norway 85.4 metres high), textiles production, and bioplastics (the Deputy Executive Secretary, of the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm Conventions will speak about How wood-based materials and cellulose could be used as a substitute for harmful chemicals on Monday).

Our exhibition and forest for fashion round table on Monday will showcase examples.”

**Message for World Tsunami Awareness Day (5 November 2019)**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, reminded journalists that World Tsunami Awareness Day would be celebrated on 5 November.

In his annual message, the Secretary-General of the United Nations recalled that this year marked the 15th anniversary of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, when 230,000 lives were tragically lost in 14 countries. Since then, he said, there had been great improvements in early warning systems, not only for the Pacific Ocean
but also for the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, the North East Atlantic, the Mediterranean and others. As a result, many lives had been saved.

Despite this progress, the risks remained immense. An estimated 680 million people lived in low-lying coastal zones, and by 2050, this number might surpass 1 billion. At the same time, rising sea levels caused by the climate emergency may further exacerbate the destructive power of tsunamis, said the Secretary-General, who urged governments, local authorities and the construction industry to pursue risk-informed development and invest in resilience.

His full statement was available online.

**Geneva announcements**

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said the Human Rights Committee would continue the review of its draft general comment on the right of peaceful assembly on the afternoon of Monday, 4 November 2019 at 3 p.m.

Mr. LeBlanc also said the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women would be meeting in private until the end of its seventy-fourth session, on the afternoon of Friday, 8 November 2019, when it would issue its concluding observations on the reports of the seven States parties reviewed during the session: Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lithuania and Seychelles.

Mr. LeBlanc said that Geneva Peace Week 2019 would run from 4 to 8 November 2019, with a series of events scheduled to be held at the Palais des Nations and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Mr. LeBlanc said the Secretary-General of the United Nations was in Istanbul, where he was scheduled to meet the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoðan, later that day. On Saturday, 2 November 2019, he would travel to Bangkok to deliver opening remarks at the 10th ASEAN-UN Summit and participate in the launch of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue. He was expected to hold meetings with regional leaders in the margins of the Summit, and to be back in New York on Monday, 4 November.