



## **UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing 30 March 2021**

30-03-2021 | Press Conferences

### **Story**

#### **Support for refugees affected by the Cox's Bazar fire**

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that an estimated 48,000 Rohingya refugees have lost their shelters and belongings in the blaze which devastated parts of the Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on 22 March 2021. The fire has destroyed more than 9,500 shelters at the camp – the largest in the world – which sheltered more than 600,000 refugees. Those who had lost their shelters were being temporarily accommodated within the camp. The fire had also destroyed more than 1,600 important infrastructure facilities vital for daily operations, including hospitals, learning centres, aid distribution points and a registration site.

In addition to thousands of relief items, UNHCR had provided medical supplies to partners and was supporting IOM in the affected areas. Mobile medical teams had been established and equipped to provide first aid to affected refugees. Psychosocial support had been provided to more than 4,000 affected refugees.

The full briefing note can be found here: [UNHCR - UNHCR rushing support and aid to Rohingya refugees affected by last week's massive fire](#).

In response to journalists, Mr. Mahecic said that the authorities had established a high-level committee to investigate the cause of the fire, whose outcome was pending. Many victims had been treated for burns and 300 persons remained unaccounted for. UNHCR and its partners were working on the ground and had set up

helpdesks and helplines to identify persons who had been separated from their families. They had been able to reunite 600 boys and girls with their families. The authorities had so far confirmed 11 deaths.

### **Humanitarian situation in Mozambique**

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that OCHA was following with deep concern developments in northern Mozambique, where non-State armed groups had been carrying out attacks in Palma District since 24 March. Sporadic clashes were reportedly ongoing in the district, which was home to about 110,000 people – about 40 per cent of whom had already been displaced from other parts of Cabo Delgado Province. Communications were down and it was extremely challenging to verify information on the situation. OCHA had received alarming reports that dozens of civilians had been killed during the attacks and clashes. Thousands of people had fled to the bush around the town of Palma, while thousands more had sought refuge near the Afunga natural gas site, which is 15 kilometres by road from the town.

It was likely that thousands more people were making their way by foot, boat and road to reach safer destinations, including the city of Pemba, 400 kilometres to the south. Most of those people had nothing and they would require urgent assistance at their destinations. Further reports indicated that people were fleeing north towards the Tanzanian border and westwards towards the Mueda and Montepuez districts. The United Nations and its humanitarian partners had responded rapidly to ensure that it had teams ready to receive them.

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said that UNICEF teams at Pemba airport had yesterday received children evacuated from Afungi by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service. At least seven of the evacuated children were unaccompanied; all were disoriented and afraid; and most had spent days hiding in the bush without food and water. One injured girl was so traumatized that all she could say was her first name. At Pemba Provincial Hospital, local authorities were already caring for displaced children. UNICEF was working with children and local authorities throughout the province to prepare to receive children affected by the violence. They would require protection, nutrition, health care, and psychosocial support, while unaccompanied children would need to be reunited with their families. Approximately 350,000 children had been displaced by the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado, even before the recent events in Palma. The people of the province had also had to contend with a cholera outbreak, the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and a series of extreme weather events since 2019. UNICEF appealed for the international community not to forget the children of Cabo Delgado.

Responding to journalists, she said that UNICEF did not have any confirmed reports of the recruitment of child soldiers by non-State armed groups in Cabo Delgado. However, it did fear that the attacks might precipitate a larger wave of displacement, while humanitarian capacities in the province were very stretched. The USD 52.8 million UNICEF appeal to meet the humanitarian needs in Mozambique was currently 67 per cent underfunded.

Tomson Phiri, for the World Food Programme (WFP), said that WFP was working around the clock to assist people in need following the outbreak of violence in Palma. It was providing emergency food assistance and was deploying immediate response rations to support displaced persons who might arrive in Pemba or Ibo Island, as well as displaced persons reaching Mueda. An additional 2,000 response rations kits were being prepositioned to support displaced persons in the southern parts of Palma District. WFP had deployed humanitarian teams in strategic points to receive people fleeing the clashes. Prior to the attack, WFP and partners had delivered 258 metric tonnes of food assistance to meet the needs of nearly 16,000 people for one month in Palma. Further food assistance in Palma district had been temporarily suspended owing to the ongoing violence. WFP remained committed to ensuring emergency assistance and planned to resume food assistance in Palma as soon as it was possible to do so. WFP was providing high energy biscuits for people being evacuated via Afungi both by air and sea. Moreover, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service was transporting critical medical staff and humanitarian workers to support those most in need, and, on an exceptional basis, was supporting the evacuation of civilians, including women, children and the critically

injured. Just yesterday, four rotations had been completed, evacuating 82 people.

Paul Dillon, for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said that IOM was extremely concerned about the violence in Palma. The situation on the ground is still volatile and little information was available. Evacuated persons had told IOM staff that they had seen their family members killed and that they had hidden in the forest to evade the armed men who attacked their communities. Others do not know where their family members are. They reported that many homes have been destroyed.

IOM had deployed teams to areas where IDPs were arriving or are expected to arrive in coming days. Many had fled with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. As of 30 March, IOM has registered 3,361 internally displaced persons (672 families) arriving by foot, bus, and boat from Palma to the districts of Nangade, Mueda, Montepuez and the city of Pemba. The number of displaced persons was likely to rise significantly in the coming hours and days.

IOM was providing assistance including medical assistive devices, such as wheelchairs or crutches, and was distributing emergency items such as medical masks, water buckets, water purifying tablets and soap to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and cholera, as well as providing basic shelter and household items. Mental health, psychosocial counselling and protection assistance had already been provided to hundreds of displaced people. According to the latest IOM figures, a total of 670,000 persons have been internally displaced in northern Mozambique since the onset of attacks in October 2017. It had not yet validated reports of refugees crossing the border into Tanzania. IOM stood ready to support vulnerable communities and internally displaced persons.

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency, said that UNHCR, too, was extremely alarmed at the situation in Palma, which had been completely cut off. It was clear that many men, women and children had been forced to flee their homes and take refuge in the bush, and that dozens of people had been killed during the attacks. UNHCR was deeply concerned by the violence committed against civilians in Palma, including against women and children, who accounted for most of the internally displaced people in the country.

The full briefing note can be found here: [UNHCR - UNHCR alarmed at brutal attacks by insurgent armed group in Mozambique](#).

Tarik Jasarevic, for the World Health Organization said that the WHO incident manager believed that WHO had enough medical supplies in the province to respond to the crisis. It was setting up ad hoc health clusters to support the response. It had also provided local hospitals with supplies (catheters, gloves, dressings and fuel) to assist with the transfer of patients to the central hospital.

Replying to questions from journalists, Jens Laerke said that it was clear that the non-State armed group was inflicting horror on civilians. As a result, it was expected that thousands of people would move from Palma District towards Pemba, which had more humanitarian staff and better facilities. However, it was a dangerous journey and it was critical that evacuation operations should continue. He pointed out that the 2021 humanitarian response plan for Mozambique, which requested USD 254 million, was currently only 1 per cent funded, meaning that humanitarian agencies would only be able to implement 1 per cent of their programmes: a tragic outcome that would cost lives. He therefore called for an urgent response from the donor community to provide aid to those who would require it in the days ahead.

Mr. Mahecic, responding to journalists, said that in conflict situations it was common for the women and children to flee first, leaving the men behind to try to protect livestock and other property. He wished to stress that the events in Palma had been accompanied by widespread reports of human rights abuses, including the targeting of civilians in many locations; the burning of dwellings and crops, and rape and sexual violence committed against women and girls

Paul Dillon, responding to journalists, said that it was only two months since Cyclone Eloise had displaced

175,000 people. The continued lack of support meant that humanitarian agencies were now being forced to redirect resources that had been earmarked for addressing other emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Ever Given incident in the Suez Canal**

Jan Hoffman, for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that the situation in the Suez Canal had improved now that the container ship *Ever Given* had been refloated. Since the Suez Canal did not usually operate at full capacity, it would only take four to five days to clear the backlog of shipping. However, given that a significant proportion of global containerized trade passed through the canal, it was clear that the incident would have several impacts on trade and development.

Firstly, freight costs, which had already reached historical highs in early 2021, would rise even higher. Those costs would be borne by all regions of the world, regardless of whether their trade was directly impacted by the blockage of the Suez Canal.

Secondly, about 400 ships, principally those involved in trade between Asia and Europe and the east coast of North America, had been delayed, with potential repercussions for the availability of imported products such as telecoms, textiles and office equipment.

Thirdly, there would be an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, caused by the diversion of shipping around the Cape of Good Hope, as ships would have to travel longer distances and go faster to make up for lost time. Any subsequent shift in transport modality (sending cargo by train or rail instead of ship, for example) would also drive up CO2 emissions.

It was difficult to foresee the long-term effects of the incident. Logistics operators and carriers might push to use alternative routes or alternative modes of transport. There might also be a drive for further improvements in safety and security. UNCTAD hoped that the incident would raise awareness of the importance of shipping for trade and development, and of the need to continue investment in tracking and forecasting and flexible and resilient systems. It was worth noting that megaships were not only prone to blocking canals, but they made it difficult for ports to cope with increased demand and increased logistics costs.

Replying to questions from journalists, Mr. Hoffman said that he hoped that the incident would not discourage shipping, since that was the mode of trade that causes the fewest emissions. In his view, global logistics chains were secure and efficient, and the incident did not mean that there was a need to rethink the entire system.

### **Announcements**

Sarah Bel, for the United Nations Development Programme, said that on Thursday, 1 April 2021, UNDP would launch a new report, entitled *Sovereign Debt Vulnerabilities in Developing Economies*. The report, released ahead of the Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, will analyse debt vulnerability across 120 low- and middle-income economies to identify which were most at risk. It classifies 72 economies as “vulnerable,” of which 19 were “severely vulnerable.” The study estimates that about USD 600 billion of external public debt service payments were at risk across those countries from 2021-2025. However, the most significant threat, according to the report, is not a string of defaults but the possibility of a prolonged debt crisis that would leave countries with crushing debt burdens for years — preventing governments from making critical investments to benefit their own people and address the climate crisis. A press release would be issued to journalists under embargo.

UNDP would also present, in Geneva at 3 p.m., its Human Development Report 2020, entitled *The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene*. Speakers would include Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva; His Excellency Ambassador Nazhat Shameem Khan, President of the Human Rights Council; Peter Bakker, President and CEO of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development; and Stewart Maginnis, Global Director of the Nature-Based Solutions Group,

International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Mr. Jasarevic, for the World Health Organization, said that a media advisory would be sent out ahead of the presentation of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on immunization, to be held at 12 noon on 31 March, at which the Group would present the conclusions of its meeting last week, in which it had discussed issues including vaccine policies and COVID-19 variants and vaccine candidates.

Michele Zaccheo, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the Brussels V Conference – Supporting the future of Syria and the region, co-chaired by the United Nations and the European Union, would open today at 1 p.m. The Conference would be streamed on the website of the European Union. At 2.50 p.m. CET, a press conference would be held with Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretariat-General for Humanitarian Affairs, at which it was expected that pledges for Syria would be announced.

Finally, he said that the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities would close its twenty-fourth session on Thursday, 1 April at 2.15 p.m.