UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: 5 November 2019

05-11-2019 | Press Conferences

Story

Update on the Syrian Constitutional Committee

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

“On Monday, the first meeting of the Small Body of 45 members of the Constitutional Committee convened at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The meetings, being led by the two co-chairs with the facilitation of the Special Envoy for Syria, will continue this week.

The first working session of the Small Body was positive. The meeting focused on the processes and agenda of the Small Body, which will work on the draft constitution that will be presented to the 150 Constitutional Committee members to approve.

As Mr. Geir O. Pedersen noted on Friday, the Constitutional Committee members in the Small Body were
agreed on by the Large Body of 150 members.

On Friday, the Office of the Special Envoy also released the Code of Conduct and Initial Procedural Practices that were adopted by consensus in the Committee.

Additionally, the Humanitarian Task Force will convene at 10.30 a.m. on Thursday.”

Responding to a question from a journalist, Ms. Fenton stressed that the Special Envoy remained on hand to facilitate proceedings as the co-chairs desired, but the process itself was Syrian-owned and Syrian-led.

**Floods in Somalia, South Sudan and other parts of Africa and the Middle East**

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

“An aeroplane – a Fokker 50 cargo freighter - carrying six metric tons of aid items from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, landed on Monday in Belet Weyne in Somalia’s Hiirshabelle state to assist people displaced by the country’s worst flooding in years.

Monday’s delivery was the first in a series of flights UNHCR is organizing to bring in humanitarian supplies to more than 20,000 people who have been cut off by the floodwaters and can only be reached by air. We are scheduling up to 10 flights – three a day – to airtift a total of 60 metric tons of urgently needed humanitarian relief kits, including jerry cans, soap, blankets, kitchen sets and plastic sheets.

UNHCR will also deliver some 2,000 emergency shelter kits to the area. Additionally, 500 further emergency kits will be airlifted to South West State, where there has also been serious flooding.

The air operation largely depends on landing strips being available as floodwaters have engulfed a vast area. Reports by our partners indicate that villages on the outskirts of Belet Weyne, which is about 340 km north of Mogadishu, have been submerged and hundreds of families trapped in their homes.

The impact of the floods has been devastating for local communities in Somalia, with more than 270,000 people displaced in the last two weeks. The majority – some 230,000 people – have taken shelter in Belet Weyne town and are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

Somalia has shown progress in dealing with both armed conflict and drought, but remains fragile, with an internally displaced population of some 2.6 million with a further 770,000 Somalis living as refugees in neighbouring countries, mostly Kenya and Ethiopia.

The floods highlight Somalia’s increasing vulnerability to the effects of climate change. In July this year, humanitarian agencies had launched a drought impact response plan following below average rains, resulting in a severe drought conditions in the country.

Given the latest developments, an immediate humanitarian emergency response is crucial UNHCR and partners have mobilized USD 2.5 million for the response, with a gap of a further USD 11 million required to meet the humanitarian needs.”

Tarik Jašareviæ, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that many flood-hit districts in Somalia were cholera hotspots, where people already faced limited access to health facilities. With many roads now impassable and an upsurge of malaria and diarrhoea, the situation for many people had become critical. In line with the Government’s relief plan, WHO had helped deploy 20 emergency response teams and 10 rapid response teams, and it had distributed 483 medical supply packages including cholera modules and trauma supplies. A rapid needs assessment had been conducted to prepare the response.
Mr. Jašareviæ went on to say that WHO was upping disease surveillance actions and providing critical supplies to flood-stricken populations across Africa and the Middle East. Well over a million people had been affected in the worst-hit countries of Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Flood-hit populations faced dangers from waterborne diseases, disease through overcrowding in temporary shelters, and an increased risk of illness or death as health services became unreachable. Working with governments, the United Nations and other partners, WHO sought to reduce the risk of outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, typhoid and other infectious diseases.

South Sudan in particular had experienced heavy flooding since July 2019, which had affected 32 counties. Since the latest rains had begun, 42 nutrition centres had been forced to suspend services. Most of the affected areas had already been facing high humanitarian needs before the flooding started, with more than 60 per cent of them classified as having extreme levels of acute malnutrition, mostly impacting children and new mothers.

Nearly one million people had been affected by heavy flooding which had devastated large areas and displaced many communities including internally displaced people, refugees and their host communities in a country already hit by years of civil war that caused mass displacement and wrecked the economy.

Access to health facilities, nutrition services, basic services and markets were among the needs most affected by the floods. The rains were likely to continue at least until the end of November and put more people at risk of infectious diseases. To aid the Government’s emergency response, WHO was making a range of experts available, medical supplies had been airlifted to hard-hit areas, and more deliveries were set for the coming days.

WHO had repurposed staff to support the Government and had airlifted supplies from its logistical hub in Ghana. An operational response plan had been developed at a cost of USD 3.6 million. A flash appeal had been launched and other funding mechanisms were being explored.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that in this context, she wished to draw attention to the fact that 5 November marked World Tsunami Awareness Day. The 2019 edition was dedicated to Target (d) of the "Sendai Seven Campaign" which focused on reducing disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services. It had been estimated that, by 2030, 50 per cent of the world population would live in coastal areas potentially exposed to storms, flooding and tsunamis.

In response to a question from a journalist, Mr. Mahécic said that, according to current estimates, more than 300,000 Somalis were being affected by the floods in their country. A concerted interagency humanitarian effort was underway to help them.

Also responding to a question from a journalist, Mr. Jašareviæ pointed out that, although floods were often associated with increased risks from waterborne and vector-borne diseases, infectious conditions were not the only concern of WHO. Flooding raised multiple other health-related issues including drowning, injury, access to health services and loss of medication for existing chronic conditions.

In answer to a question about casualty figures, Mr. Jašareviæ said that cyclonic storm Luban had struck Yemen in October, killing 14 people and displacing more than 800. WHO had preposition supplies and medical kits to aid those affected.

**Update on education in Cameroon**

Marixie Mercado, for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), read the following statement:

“Three years of violence and instability in the north-west and south-west regions of Cameroon have left more than 855,000 children out of school. Two months since the beginning of the new school year, around
90 per cent of public primary schools (more than 4,100 schools) and 77 per cent of public secondary schools (or 744) remain closed or non-operational.

The north-west and south-west regions used to be the places where education was best across the country but it has seen a continuing no-school policy instated by non-state armed groups. In the past three years, at least 70 schools have been destroyed, and pupils and teachers have been kidnapped. A very real fear of violence also keeps parents from sending their children to school and teachers and staff from reporting to work.

In some areas where schools have been closed, community-run learning activities have been initiated to so that children do not miss out further on their education. UNICEF is procuring reading books and other learning materials for 37,000 school-age children, and we are training teachers, including on social cohesion and accelerated learning. We will also be disseminating literacy and numeracy lessons by radio for children who are forced to stay at home so that they can catch up with learning.

UNICEF calls on all communities, armed groups and government authorities to protect education in all its forms, to respect teachers and other education personnel, and to enable children to learn in a safe and protective environment. Without urgent action, and without a commitment from all parties to the conflict to protect education in all its forms, the future of these children is at risk.

What began as a political crisis in the north-west and south-west regions is now a quickly deteriorating humanitarian emergency. Around 1.9 million people, about half of whom are children, are estimated to be in need, an increase of 80 per cent compared to 2018, and an almost 15-fold increase since 2017. Humanitarian conditions are projected to deteriorate further in 2020 in the absence of a political solution.

Security poses a major constraint. UNICEF has recorded 529 security incidents in both regions since the beginning of the year. Since August, a growing number of NGOs have been affected by incidents including hostage-taking and extortion, and five out of seven attacks against aid workers took place between September and October. The north-west region is especially affected.

In the south-west region, access has improved slightly and we have been able to conduct more missions during the second quarter of the year compared to the first, and to reach places that haven’t been accessible for a year or more. At this point, approximately 65 per cent of both regions are inaccessible due to insecurity but also to a lesser degree because of extremely poor road conditions.

Funding is another huge constraint. UNICEF is just 45 per cent funded against our 2019 requirement of USD 20 million for the response in the north-west and south-west regions.”

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that attacks on civilians, humanitarian supplies and personnel were on the rise in the north-west and south-west regions of Cameroon. On 2 September, gunmen shot at an ambulance of the Archdiocese of Bamenda at Akumin in the north-west. In another incident on 28 September, non-State armed groups burnt a truck carrying WFP aid supplies in Bambili in the same region. Also in September, three female students from the Catholic school at Ngongham were reportedly kidnapped by suspected non-State armed groups while they were going to school.

Funding was constraining the humanitarian response in Cameroon. The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan required USD 299 million and was 41 per cent funded. The education cluster of that appeal was even less well funded: just 11 per cent of the nearly USD 16 million requested.

Responding to questions from journalists, Mr. Laerke said that he had no further information about the identity of the groups involved in the violence other than that they were non-State actors.
Monika Gehner, for the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), said that a new publication entitled “Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019” was the first offering of a new “measuring digital development” series, which was being rolled out by ITU. With the new series, ITU intended to provide a constant stream of information about telecommunications around the world, rather than releasing statistics once a year as had been the case in the past. The current publication and its associated press release would remain under embargo until midday on 5 November.

The purpose of the new publication was to provide key data on Internet usage to track progress at the global level and help policy-makers and regulators make informed policy decisions. Digital technologies were improving lives in many fields and it was important that everyone should be able to access those benefits.

One key message of the publication was that Internet access was not necessarily synonymous with Internet usage. A total of 96 per cent of the world’s population had access to a mobile signal but only 53.6 per cent (4.1 billion persons) actually used the Internet. That meant that 3.6 billion people were not participating in the digital revolution.

Another important message to emerge from the document was that the digital gender gap was widening. Over the previous two years, Internet access had increased more among men than among women. In fact, more than 52 per cent of women in the world did not currently use the Internet, as compared to 42 per cent of men.

The third message of the report was that growth rates for Internet access and use had slowed with respect to ten years previously, particularly in developed countries. In order to improve access, it was necessary to lower the cost of broadband, introduce innovative policies and financing for infrastructure particularly in remote areas, provide more affordable services with relevant content in local languages and build digital skills and literacy among users.

Responding to questions from journalists, Susan Teltscher for the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), said that the digital gender gap was particularly marked in less-developed countries and least developed countries. There were a number of possible reasons for the fact that fewer women than men in those regions used the Internet: a higher proportion of women lived in rural areas where Internet coverage was limited; women had less access to education than men and a proportionally higher number of them suffered illiteracy and poverty. All those factors constituted obstacles to Internet access and usage.

Moreover, although urbanization was expanding across the developing world, fewer women than men were involved in the move towards the cities.

In answer to further questions, Ms. Teltscher explained that the publication – which provided aggregate-level statistics but not details about the situation in specific countries – compared the figures of 2013 with those of 2019. For example, in the least developed countries the gender gap had been 29 per cent in 2013 but had grown to 42.8 per cent by 2019. Internet penetration rates in those countries currently stood at 24.4 per cent for men and 13.9 per cent for women.

Ms. Teltscher emphasized that Internet access had grown steadily over recent years. It was important now to focus on persons at the bottom of the pyramid and to identify the barriers that prevented them from participating in the digital revolution. Digital awareness, training and skills were all major obstacles that, once again, disproportionately impacted women. In a highly interconnected world, persons without access to the Internet would find themselves increasingly cut off, not only from educational and economic opportunities, but also from government services. ITU was working to address the issue, also with partners from outside the telecommunications sector such as UNESCO and other United Nations agencies.

ILO statistics portal and conference on 100 Years of Maternity Protection

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), said that ILO was launching a new portal...
containing data and statistics on a wide range of labour-related topics, listed by country and by subject. The portal, which was available in English French and Spanish, also linked to blogs and insights by ILO statisticians and economists. If journalists wished, she would organize a training session on the use of the new tool.

On a separate front, Ms. Yarde informed journalists that on Friday 8 November, as part of its centenary celebrations, ILO would be hosting a one-day event on “100 Years of Maternity Protection: Transforming Leave and Care Policies for All”. Policymakers and experts would come together to discuss the issue and to draw political attention to the need to achieve universal maternity protection and raise awareness about the benefits of universal social protection.

United States withdraws from 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change

Responding to a query raised by a journalist, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the Government of the United States had officially communicated its withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. She referred to the Note of Correspondents distributed to the journalists.

United Nations liquidity crisis

Responding to a question posed by a journalist, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that, since the Secretary-General had raised the alarm about the serious cash liquidity crisis the United Nations was facing, further contributions had been received from Member States. However, the crisis was not yet resolved. A list of States that had fully paid their dues for 2019 was available online. The list also included information relative to past years. A number of States had paid their dues in part and did not figure on the list.

Positive discussions about the current situation had been held with Member States; some contributions had been made and more were expected. In the meantime, cost-saving measures were being implemented in New York and in Geneva. Every effort was being made not to affect human resources, which were the United Nations’ greatest asset. Cost-cutting was therefore focused on travel and procurement as well as on limiting opening hours, restricting meeting times and saving on infrastructural and operational costs.

Geneva announcements

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that the opening ceremony for Geneva Peace Week would take place at 5 p.m. that day at the Geneva Graduate Institute. The Week would see the participation of more than 100 experts, activists and decision makers who would come together in more than 70 events to consider concrete actions in the face of increasing peace and security challenges in a rapidly changing world. The opening ceremony would be open by the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva and would feature, inter alia, Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, and the Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, said that, next Thursday morning, the Human Rights Committee would continue the review of its general comment on the right to peaceful assembly. On Friday 8 November, it would close its 127th session during which it had considered reports from Belgium, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Czech Republic, Mexico and Senegal.