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Story

Situation in Afghanistan

Shabia Mantoo, for the United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR), said the human toll of spiralling hostilities in Afghanistan was immense. The United Nations Assistance Mission had warned that without a significant de-escalation in violence, Afghanistan was on course to witness the highest ever number of documented civilian casualties in a single year since the UN's records began.

UNHCR was particularly worried about the **impact of the conflict on women and girls**. Some 80 per cent of nearly 250,000 Afghans forced to flee since the end of May were women and children. Some 400,000 civilians had been forced from their homes since the beginning of the year, joining 2.9 million Afghans already internally displaced across the country at the end of 2020. The overwhelming majority of Afghans forced to flee remained within the country, as close to their homes as fighting would allow. Since the beginning of this year, nearly 120,000 Afghans had fled from rural areas and provincial towns to Kabul province.

UNHCR was urging the international community to urgently step up its support to respond to this displacement crisis. UNHCR's own teams, as part of the broader UN effort, had assessed the needs of almost 400,000 internally displaced civilians this year. Responding initially to the most critical priorities, UNHCR was providing food, shelter, hygiene and sanitary kits and other lifesaving assistance, together with partners.

UNHCR was calling on neighbouring countries to keep their borders open in light of the intensifying crisis in Afghanistan. It stood ready to help national authorities scale up humanitarian responses as needed.

In the context of generalized insecurity in many parts of Afghanistan, it was also clear that Afghans outside of the country may have international protection needs. States were called to ensure they were able to seek safety, regardless of their current legal status. UNHCR welcomed the actions taken by several states to temporarily halt deportations of failed asylum-seekers. UNHCR called for a permanent ceasefire and a negotiated settlement in the interests of the Afghan people.

Tomson Phiri, for the World Food Programme (WFP), warned of a **worsening food security situation** in Afghanistan. One in three Afghans were acutely food insecure today – equivalent to 14 million people in IPC Phase 3 or worse. Some 2 million children needed nutrition treatment. The country had been hit by a second drought episode in four years and a below average harvest was projected. WFP feared a larger tide of hunger was fast approaching. The situation had all the hallmarks of a humanitarian catastrophe.

The price of both wheat and wheat flour remained much higher than pre-COVID levels. In the last three months, WFP had provided food and nutrition assistance to 4.1 million people. But it was not enough. WFP's plan was to scale-up assistance to reach 9 million people by December.

WFP would preposition food closest to people's homes. WFP had six field offices with total warehousing capacity of 52,000 tons. Using a fleet 144-truck strong, WFP could transport 12,000 tons per month. Plans were underway to boost capacity to 40,000 MT per month. WFP provided cash transfers and had disbursed 26.6 million USD between January and June. But WFP was severely under-resourced and was calling for \$200 million to get it through to the end of the year.

Mr. LeBlanc, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said the Secretary-General was following, with deep concern, developments in Afghanistan, including the latest fighting in Herat and Kandahar. Mr. Guterres was particularly concerned about the shift of fighting to urban areas, where the potential for civilian harm was even greater. The Secretary-General hoped that the discussions this week in Doha between representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Taliban, along with regional and international envoys, would restore the pathway to a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The United Nations stood ready to contribute to such a settlement and remained focused on providing assistance to the increasing number of Afghans in need.

Answering questions from journalists, Jens Laerke, for Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the UN had had a humanitarian presence in Afghanistan for the last 70 years. OCHA would stay and deliver for the Afghan people. OCHA was working with 156 humanitarian partners inside Afghanistan, to the benefit of some 8 million Afghans in 2021 alone. As humanitarians, OCHA would engage with anyone, including the Taliban, if it pertained to accessing people in need, and if that access was for delivery of humanitarian assistance based on the core humanitarian principles of complete neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

The recent, massive displacements were creating challenges in the dispensing of aid in urban areas. Assessment missions were being conducted on how to adapt the response. Some 21 000 IDPs had been recorded in Kabul, with reports of thousands more rushing in. A growing number of those people had no place to sleep.

Answering other questions, Ms. Mantoo said some 120 000 Afghans had fled to the Kabul city and province. It was alarming that 80% of those fleeing were women, children, and infants. Civilian casualties were spiraling, and Afghanistan was on the brink of a humanitarian disaster. Insecurity was also rising, with reports of extortion of fleeing people by non-State groups. More support for live-saving interventions was needed.

Most displacements were happening inside Afghanistan, with no major cross-border movements. Iran and

Pakistan hosted 90% of all Afghan refugees abroad. But this hospitality could not be taken for granted. Any major influx would require the international community to help Afghanistan and neighboring countries.

Mr. Phiri added that women and children suffered the most, partly because they could not access aid distribution centers. Humanitarians were trying hard to adapt their approaches so that assistance could reach the persons in need. The best-case scenario would be a holding peace agreement, so that people could access services.

Mr. LeBlanc said the security of UN staff, including international and national staff, was a priority for the UN. It had contingency plans that were reviewed as the situation was evolving. The UN relied on the Afghan government, as the host country responsible for the security of UN staff on its territory. Overall, there were some 720 UN staff there. About 300 UN staff remained on site in Afghanistan, many others had been working remotely because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

James Elder, for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said many children had been killed in the fighting. There were also reports of minors being recruited by armed groups.

Fadela Chaib, for the World Health Organization (WHO), added that Afghanistan's humanitarian needs were both enormous and complex. Trauma was a major public health concern that was aggravated by the recent escalation in violence. WHO was supporting trauma care in 130 facilities, as well as blood banks, and training health workers on mass casualty management. WHO was also concerned by the shortage of medical supplies.

Systematic sexual violence in DR Congo's Tanganyika Province

Taking the floor again, Shabia Mantoo, United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR), said the UN Refugee Agency was gravely concerned about incidents of widespread and **systematic sexual violence against Congolese women and girls**, perpetrated by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Tanganyika Province. More than 23,000 people had been displaced since May in northern Tanganyika's Kongolo Territory alone, according to local authorities.

In the past two weeks, humanitarian partners in the Kongolo and Mbulula health zones had recorded 243 incidents of rape, 48 of which involved minors, in 12 villages. The actual figures were thought to be even higher as reporting of gender-based violence remained taboo in most communities.

The attacks were reportedly being carried out by armed groups competing to control mining areas – especially gold mines – and as retaliation against government-led military operations. Civilians found themselves trapped in the middle of intense confrontations between different groups.

UNHCR and its partners worked with local authorities and humanitarian actors to ensure that psychosocial and medical support was provided to survivors, but the ongoing conflict and long distances to reach health centres were making it extremely difficult for them to access assistance. UNHCR was calling on the authorities to urgently scale up security in the area bordering several localities between Tanganyika, Maniema, and South Kivu Provinces, to protect civilians, especially women and girls; allow humanitarian access; and for investigations to be launched and the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

Humanitarian and protection needs were growing and UNHCR was seeking further financial support – it had received just 36 per cent of the US\$205 million required for its operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Extreme heat in the Mediterranean and North Africa

Bob Stefanski, Head of Applied Climate Services at the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said the WMO was seeking to verify a reported temperature of 48.8° C (119.8° F) in Sicily on 11 August, and to establish whether this was a new **temperature record for continental Europe**. WMO had to make sure

these records were verified for the sake of scientific understanding and accuracy. Other temperature records in Tunisia needed to be verified. With the heat came a wildfire threat affecting Greece, Turkey, and North Africa. The heatwave should peak this weekend and subside next week.

The newly released [Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC](#) stated that with climate change, we had been observing more frequent and severe high temperature events, and this would continue in the future. This was seen in Europe, where the frequency and intensity of hot extremes had increased in recent decades and were projected to keep increasing regardless of the greenhouse gas emissions scenario. Europe would need to prepare for the eventuality of further records being broken, temperatures above 50° C being possible in the future.

Outbreak of Marburg virus in Guinea

Fadela Chaib, for the [World Health Organization](#), said that on 9 August, health authorities in Guinea had confirmed one case of the **Marburg virus disease**. Efforts were ongoing to find the people who may have been in contact with the patient. As the disease was appearing for the first time in the country, health authorities were launching public education and community mobilization to raise awareness to curb widespread infection.

An initial team of ten WHO experts, including epidemiologists and socio-anthropologists, was on the ground helping to investigate the case and supporting the efforts by the national health authorities to implement the national response plan. Cross-border surveillance was also being enhanced to quickly detect any cases, with neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia on alert; as of 11 August, nearly 200 people had been screened. There was no vaccine against the highly contagious Marburg virus.

Answering questions regarding the second phase of the **SARS-CoV-2 virus origin studies**, including the question of a WHO mission to China, Ms. Chaib referred journalists to WHO's [statement](#) that was published yesterday. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, she added, WHO had been working with Member States and the scientific community to better understand how this pandemic began so we could be better prepared for the next one.

WHO called for all governments to depoliticize the situation and cooperate to accelerate the origins studies. It was vitally important to know how the COVID-19 pandemic began, to set an example for establishing the origins of all future animal-human spillover events. Countries had a collective responsibility to work together in the true spirit of partnership and to ensure scientists and experts have the space they need to find the origins of the worst pandemic in a century.

The International Scientific Advisory Group for Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO) would support the undertaking of recommended studies outlined in the March 2021 report. Ms. Chaib finally reminded that WHO was against any mandatory vaccination. A press conference on COVID-19 would take place next Wednesday, 18 August, at 3 p.m.

Announcements

Rhéal LeBlanc, for the [United Nations Information Service](#), said that the 25th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) would open next Monday, 16 August, at 12:30 p.m. During the session, the Committee would review the reports of France and Djibouti.

On 16 August, at 4 p.m., the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) would start reviewing the report of Netherlands, ending on Tuesday, 17 August, at 4 p.m.

Also on Tuesday, the Conference on Disarmament (CD) would hold a plenary meeting at 10 a.m. under the presidency of Chile.

Finally, Mr. LeBlanc reminded that the UN would celebrate World Humanitarian Day with an official

ceremony next Thursday, 19 August, at 3 p.m., outside Room XX at the Palais des Nations. Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, and Ms. Michelle Bachelet, UN High-Commissioner for Human Rights, would be among those making statements.