



Bi-weekly Press Briefing 31AUG2021

31-08-2021 | Press Conferences

Story

Afghanistan

Responding to questions from journalists on the situation in Afghanistan, Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the Secretary-General's spokesman had expressed the hope that the Taliban would be able to secure the airport in Kabul and provide an environment in which the airport could function, aircraft operators could safely land and take off and the United Nations could continue its humanitarian work. She reiterated that the safety of all United Nations personnel was the top priority for the Organization; measures were being taken to help national staff working for the Organization, including urging Member States to offer them at least temporary visas to ensure their safety. Furthermore, as the Taliban were the de facto authority in the country, they had the duty and responsibility to provide protection to United Nations facilities and staff. There were currently around 3,000 national staff and some 200 international staff in the country.

Ms. Vellucci added that the World Food Programme was appealing for funds to create a humanitarian air bridge into Afghanistan: USD 18 million for passenger services and USD 12 million for a cargo air bridge.

Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the first delivery of medical supplies to the country since the departure of the country's Government had arrived on Monday 30 August at Mazar-e-Sharif, with supplies to cover the basic health needs of over 200,000 people, 3,500 surgical procedures and equipment to treat 6,500 trauma victims. Supplies would be delivered to over 40 health facilities in 29

provinces in the country to cover urgent gaps, but much more would be required. WHO had already released USD 1.95 million from its emergencies funds and would soon be making an appeal for more funding to support further airlifts. Two more airlifts were planned for this week to Mazar-e-Sharif from the WHO logistics hub in Dubai. It was also considering the possibility of using the humanitarian air bridges set up by the World Food Programme. It had distributed first aid kits, basic medicine kits and cholera kits to health facilities, but clinics on the ground were reporting that they were down to their last supplies.

WHO was extremely concerned that the cuts in funding from donors in Afghanistan would force non-governmental organizations to scale down operations or close health facilities supported under the Sehatmandi project, which would impact services including immunization for children, maternity care, malnutrition care and COVID-19 treatment. The cuts were taking place against a background of existing food insecurity in the country, where over 12 million people were projected to experience food insecurity and half of all children were expected to be severely malnourished in 2021. Delays in humanitarian aid supply shipments amidst the ongoing food and medical supply shortage need to be urgently addressed.

James Elder, for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said that all deaths of children in Afghanistan were tragic; it was not possible to confirm the number who had been killed in the recent drone strike. The view of UNICEF was that all parties must respect international humanitarian law and protect children, schools and hospitals at all costs. Almost 500 children had been killed since the beginning of the year. The aim of UNICEF during the current insecurity was to stay and deliver assistance to all those remaining in the country, including the 10 million children in need of humanitarian support.

Jens Laerke, for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that, while the armies had left, the United Nations had stayed and was committed to staying in Afghanistan. Operations to supply medical and support materials were continuing, but more resources were needed. OCHA had already delivered humanitarian aid to 8 million people since the start of the year. In respect of internally displaced persons, OCHA was continuing, as it had done for decades, to speak to the Taliban and other forces on the ground to ensure that it could reach the people in need: it was only with the acceptance of all parties that it could deliver its mandate. He said that the current funding appeal by OCHA for USD 1.3 million was as yet only 39 per cent funded.

Andrej Mahecic, for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said that the refugee crisis in Afghanistan was primarily internal, with 500,000 persons displaced within the country since the beginning of the year, adding to the existing 3 million internally displaced persons. UNHCR had been working with Pakistan, which was currently host to 1.4 million Afghan refugees, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, where there were 800,000 refugees, for the past four decades. As many of those who wished to cross the border into neighbouring countries did not have identity documents, UNHCR was calling on those countries to keep their borders open to allow persons at risk to find safety; it would help those countries' authorities with their humanitarian response.

Responding to a question, Mr. Mahecic for UNHCR added that there were currently around 5,000 Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers in the United States of America and several hundred in other countries of the Americas region. However, evacuation should not be confused with resettlement; many of those evacuated might later find solutions such as voluntary repatriation, but resettlement was needed for the most vulnerable to give them a chance to start a new life. UNHCR was calling for increased opportunities for resettlement for refugees.

New coronavirus disease (COVID-19) variant

In answer to a question, Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that WHO was in touch with researchers in South Africa, who had first presented their findings on the variant C.1.2 to the WHO Virus Evolution Working Group in July 2021. Thanks to such scientific collaboration, WHO was able to quickly monitor and assess variants and alert the world of any risk posed by them. The C.1.2 variant did not appear to be increasing in circulation. If WHO were to determine that it was a variant of interest or

concern, it would share the information and discuss the findings in its weekly epidemiological update.

World Health Organization announcements

Margaret Harris, for the World Health Organization (WHO), said that the WHO Global status report on the public health response to dementia would be launched at a press conference at 9.30 a.m. on Thursday 2 September 2021, with the participation of Katrin Seeher and Tarun Dua, of the WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Use. There were 55 million people in the world living with dementia, which meant that there were also 55 million families having to cope with the effect of dementia. The report would give an update on progress achieved since the 2017 analysis, which had not met expectations.

Dr. Harris also said that guidance for countries related to digital COVID-19 vaccination certificates had been published on 27 August 2021. This afternoon, guidance was to be published on innovations that could be used in fighting COVID-19 in low-resource settings, such as a method for identifying non-sterilized surfaces using the naked eye.

Responding to a question, Dr. Harris said that the COVID-19 statistics for West Africa were similar to those published the previous week, with very high numbers of cases and 9,000–10,000 deaths in the region each day.

International Labour Organization

Rosalind Yarde, for the International Labour Organization (ILO), said that the launch of the 2020-2022 World Social Protection Report, entitled *Social protection at the crossroads – in pursuit of a better future*, would take place at 11 a.m. on Wednesday 1 September 2021. The report, under embargo until 1 p.m. Central European Summer Time, gave a global overview of social protection in the world, including information related to the effects of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and would be presented by Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General and Shahra Razavi, Director, ILO Social Protection department.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Jean Rodriguez, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), said that the Set of Core Climate Change-related Indicators and Statistics and its accompanying Implementation Guidelines, to be published today, would support the implementation of the Paris Agreement and could be a useful tool for countries in their climate reporting to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Under the enhanced transparency framework, all Governments were required to produce biennial transparency reports on climate action and support, the first of which should be submitted by 31 December 2024.

The Indicator Set provided the foundation for countries' statistical offices to produce the data for the reports and would enable them to show the big picture of climate change beyond greenhouse gas emissions, in areas such as water levels, species losses, mitigation efforts and adaptations. The Set and Guidelines had been endorsed by the Conference of European Statisticians, which brought together statisticians from UNECE member States, other countries and international organizations.

World Meteorological Organization

Clare Nullis, for the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said that the *Atlas of Mortality and Economic Losses from Weather Climate and Water Extremes 1970-2019* would be launched at press conference at 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday 1 September 2021, at which Petteri Taalas, WMO Secretary-General, and Mami Mizutori, Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, would be present, with Maria Neira, Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health attending by video link. The Atlas, which offered 50 years of statistics and analysis of mortality and economic losses related to weather- and water-related events, was the most ambitious and comprehensive report as yet produced on the subject and came in the wake of the massive flooding that had

hit some European countries in July 2021.

Ms. Nullis also said that WMO was finalizing its plans for the release on Wednesday 8 September of the 2021 *United in Science* report, a multi-organization high-level compilation of the latest climate science information involving, among other organizations, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Global Carbon Project, the United Nations Children's Fund and WHO.

Other announcements

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said that the Conference on Disarmament would hold a public meeting on Wednesday 1 September to hear the last of the speakers in its debate on the participation of women in international security, after which it would resume its review of the draft annual report to the General Assembly.

Also on Wednesday 1 September, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities would conclude its review of the report of Djibouti, which had started the previous week.

Ms. Vellucci further announced that the Secretary-General had issued a message to mark 31 August 2021 as the first-ever International Day for People of African Descent. He had said that the day was a celebration of the enormous contributions of people of African descent to every field of human endeavour. Twenty years after the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, and more than halfway into the International Decade for People of African Descent, there was unprecedented momentum towards ending the global scourge of racism. The opportunity must not be squandered.

A series of hybrid events to mark the Day, including a high-level forum, a civil society forum and cultural events, was being held in Costa Rica between 31 August and 4 September.

Ms. Vellucci also announced that an exhibition entitled *Divers, Egales, Unis*, showcasing over 200 works from the United Nations collection, would open in Geneva on Wednesday 1 September 2021. It was a celebration of multilateralism and also included photographic works by the Director-General, a selection of the archives of the Red Cross in Geneva and an artistic project by the Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD).

An outdoor photo exhibition entitled *From Geneva to the World*, promoted by the European Union delegation to the United Nations, was to be launched on 6 September with the participation of Ambassador Lotte Knudsen, head of the European Union delegation, Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Daren Tang, Director-General of the World Intellectual Property Organization, and Kelly Clements, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees.