

REGULAR PRESS BRIEFING BY THE UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION SERVICE

7 May 2021

Alessandra Vellucci, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the [hybrid briefing](#), attended by spokespersons and representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Refugee Agency, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the World Health Organization.

COVID-19 surge in India: impact on children

Yasmin Haque, representative of the [United Nations Children's Fund](#) (UNICEF) in India, stated that India was in the grip of a ferocious second wave of COVID-19. In the previous 24 hours, India had seen 414,188 new cases, the highest daily case count ever recorded by any country in the pandemic. This wave was almost four times the size of the first wave and the virus was spreading much faster.

Along with the increase in COVID-19 cases, the impact on children being affected by the virus had also increased. Children were losing parents and caregivers to the virus, which was leaving many of them destitute, without parental care. This surge was also having dire consequences for children whose access to essential health, social, protection and education services was being constrained. Children were facing mental health issues and at a greater risk of violence, as lockdowns shut them off from their vital support networks.

Ms. Haque stressed that, with half of children under five in India malnourished, the present COVID-19 crisis could further impact child nutrition and service delivery across the country. Schools across the country remained closed, and remote learning was also disrupted in several states. This was tearing 247 million children in elementary and secondary education away from those safe spaces, just when they needed them most.

UNICEF in India had been on-the-ground working tirelessly since the start of the pandemic. It had sent critical lifesaving supplies to support India, including 3,000 oxygen concentrators, testing kits and other critical equipment in place. Ms. Haque emphasized that much more was needed as the outbreak continued to spread rapidly. Solidarity was necessary to prevent the situation from getting worse in other countries. Simpler Intellectual Property Rights were needed through voluntary and proactive licensing by IPR holders.

Responding to questions, Ms. Haque said UNICEF immediately needed at least USD 50 million to scale up its response, including support for mental health and education needs, among other things. There were far greater numbers of children infected by the virus in this wave, while there were no signs that the proportion of infected children was higher than before. The threat of child trafficking and exploitation was real. Vaccine nationalism, including export limitations, ought to be fought, stressed Ms. Haque.

Killing of 25 people in Rio de Janeiro

Rupert Colville, for the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), said the OHCHR was deeply disturbed by the killing of at least 25 people in a police operation in the Jacarezinho neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro on 6 May. The precise number of people injured, including bystanders and people inside their houses, was still unknown.

This appeared to have been the deadliest such operation in more than a decade in Rio de Janeiro, and furthered a long-standing trend of unnecessary and disproportionate use of force by police in Brazil's poor, marginalized and predominantly Afro-Brazilian neighbourhoods, known as *favelas*. It was particularly disturbing that the operation took place despite a Federal Supreme Court ruling in 2020, restricting police operations in Rio's favelas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

OHCHR reminded the Brazilian authorities that the use of force should be applied only when strictly necessary, and that they should always respect the principles of legality, precaution, necessity, and proportionality.

Full briefing note is available [here](#).

Responding to questions, Mr. Colville said that something was clearly not working in the system, and there was a need for a broad review of how to fix the existing deficiencies. The primary responsibility lay with the authorities, and while the country should be able to deal with crime, it had to ensure the civilian population, including women and children, were not hurt during anti-criminal operations.

Forced evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that eight Palestinian refugee families residing in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem were facing a risk of forced eviction due to a legal challenge by the Nahalat Shimon settler organization. The evictions, if ordered and implemented, would violate Israel's obligations under international law.

Given the disturbing scenes in Sheikh Jarrah over the previous few days, the OHCHR emphasized that East Jerusalem remained part of the occupied Palestinian territory, in which international humanitarian law applied. The occupying power had to respect and could not confiscate private property in the occupied territory, and also had to respect national laws, unless absolutely prevented.

OHCHR called on Israel to immediately halt all forced evictions, including those in Sheikh Jarrah, and to cease any activity that would further contribute to a coercive environment and lead to a risk of forcible transfer.

OHCHR briefing note is [here](#).

Mr. Colville, responding to questions, said there were potential war crimes being committed as well as serious breaches of the four Geneva Conventions, including transfer of population into the occupied territories. The OHCHR had been highlighting those issues year after year.

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), informed that Tor Wennesland, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East, had expressed his deep concern about the violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The Israeli Security Forces had to exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Full statement by UNSCO is [here](#).

Sexual Offences Act in Uganda

Rupert Colville, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), stated that the Ugandan Parliament's decision this week to pass a wide-ranging sexual offences bill that enshrined the criminalisation of consensual same-sex relations, sex work and those living with HIV was deeply troubling.

OHCHR was alarmed that certain offences in the Act included mandatory and forced HIV testing of defendants and treated HIV status as an aggravating factor when a person was accused of specific sexual offences. Such provisions violated Uganda's human rights obligations and risked undermining public health, leaving people afraid to come forward for essential testing and treatment.

OHCHR called for a legal framework that could support victim-centred approaches in the investigations and prosecution of sexual violence, including rape, in compliance with international law and standards.

Full note can be viewed [here](#).

Tigray

In response to a question, Rupert Colville, for the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), said that reports continued to arrive from the region of Tigray on sexual and gender-based violence, and extrajudicial killings. OHCHR was concerned that survivors of those abuses were not receiving adequate assistance. A joint investigation was getting under way between the OHCHR and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and a joint team should be deployed soon.

Humanitarian crisis in the Grand Sud of Madagascar

Jens Laerke, for the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), stated that the humanitarian crisis in the Grand Sud of Madagascar, which was experiencing its most acute drought since 1981, was deteriorating rapidly. More than 1.1 million people were severely food insecure, and the situation was expected to deteriorate in the months ahead. The number of children admitted for treatment for life-threatening severe acute malnutrition in the first quarter of 2021 had been four times the five-year average. He stressed that 14,000 people were currently experiencing famine.

The United Nations, together with its humanitarian partners, were scaling up their response, but more resources were urgently needed to save lives and alleviate the acute suffering. The Flash Appeal for Madagascar, launched in January, and calling for USD 76 million to support over one million people, was only 22 per cent funded, said Mr. Laerke.

Series of attacks force thousands to flee in Burkina Faso

Boris Cheshirkov, for the [United Nations Refugee Agency](#) (UNHCR), expressed deep concern over the humanitarian consequences of recent violence in Burkina Faso, which had killed 45 people and forced more than 17,500 people to flee their homes over the previous ten days.

Gunmen had carried out a series of attacks in three separate regions, burning down houses and shooting civilians dead. The assailants had also ransacked health centers and damaged homes and shops. In the East Region more than 4,400 people had fled to the towns of Foutouri and Tankoualou following an attack on the village of Kodyel. In the North Region, violence had pushed 10,200 people to flee towards Ouahigouya, an area that had already seen arrivals earlier this year.

Mr. Cheshirkov added that violence in Burkina Faso had forced more than 1.14 million people to flee their homes in search of safety in just over two years. The country continued to host more than 20,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. Funding for UNHCR's response remained critically low, with only 22 per cent of the USD 91.6 million requested so far received.

UNHCR briefing note is [here](#).

Humanitarian Network and Partnership Weeks

Jens Laerke, for the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), informed that the Humanitarian Networks & Partnerships Weeks 2021 would wrap up today at 1 p.m., after three weeks of online sessions that had drawn the highest participation of humanitarian practitioners and experts since the first event seven years earlier. Participation from the global south had increased, and for the first time more women than men had registered for the event. Total participation had reached 2,800 people, a 25 per cent increase compared to 2020.

Some 140 countries had joined, with many newcomers. The virtual format would be kept for future events to complement the physical meetings in Geneva, informed Mr. Laerke. More information on the HNPW can be found [here](#).

Geneva announcements

Catherine Huissoud, for the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development](#) (UNCTAD), said a press conference would be held on 12 May at 2:30 p.m. on the upcoming [UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development](#), 17-21 May. Two priority themes for the twenty-fourth session were: using science, technology and innovation to close the gap on Sustainable Development Goal 3, on good health and well-being; and harnessing blockchain for sustainable development: prospects and challenges.

Ms. Huissoud also informed that the [UN Trade Forum: Towards a Green and Inclusive Recovery](#) virtual event would take place on 14-15 June. The 2021 [Prebisch Lecture](#) would be given by Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo on 15 June.

Finally, UNCTAD's [World Investment Report](#) would be published on 16 June.

Christian Lindmeier, for the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), reminded that this week the [Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee](#), in place since 2016, had issued a report for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme. The [Review Committee on the Functioning of International Health Regulations](#) had published a report, which was available online. Both reports highlighted the WHO's central role and advocated for a better funded and supported WHO. A third report, by the [Independent Panel on Pandemic Preparedness and Response](#), was expected on 12 May; this was not a WHO report, but that of an independent panel, he stressed.

Mr. Lindmeier informed that there should be a [pre-World Health Assembly press briefing](#), on 11 May at 2 p.m., to be confirmed. The [WHA](#) would take place from 24 May to 1 June.

Members of the [WHO's Council on the Economics of Health for All](#) had been announced, and Prof. Mariana Mazzucato, the chair of the Council, would be a special guest at today's press briefing, schedule to start at 5 p.m.

An update was expected in the coming hours on the [emergency use listing of Sinopharm](#), said Mr. Lindmeier.

The [COVID-19 Global Research and Innovation Forum](#), an online event, would take place on 13-14 May and would be live streamed on the [WHO website](#).

Responding to a question, Mr. Lindmeier said the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) and the Emergency Use Listing Committee were looking into the [Sputnik V vaccine](#).

Alessandra Vellucci, for the [United Nations Information Service](#), informed that the [Committee on Enforced Disappearances](#) would close its 20th session today, and issue its concluding observations on the three reports reviewed during this session: Switzerland, Colombia, and Mongolia.

The second part of the 2021 session of the [Conference on Disarmament](#) would begin on 10 May; it would hold public plenary meetings on 11 and 12 May to have a thematic debate on Agenda item 1 "Cessation of nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament".

Ms. Vellucci, speaking on behalf of the [Human Rights Council](#) (HRC), informed that the Universal Periodic Review Working Group was reviewing the human rights record of Palau today, after which it would adopt its reports for reviews it conducted earlier this week for: Namibia, Niger, Mozambique, Estonia, Belgium, and Paraguay.

Ms. Vellucci also informed that the joint EU-UN Spotlight Initiative had allocated 15 small grants to Central Asian NGOs. The total grant budget is over USD 409,000. More information is available [here](#).

Finally, Ms. Vellucci said that, as of 6 May, 262 UN Secretariat staff in Geneva had tested positive to COVID-19 since March 2020.

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The webcast for this briefing is available here: <https://bit.ly/3erJ6rx>
The audio for this briefing is available here: <https://bit.ly/3um11oY>