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# News & Media

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## REGULAR PRESS BRIEFING BY THE INFORMATION SERVICE

9 April 2013

Corinne Momal-Vanian, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the briefing which was also attended by Spokespersons for the High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Health Organization.

### Syria

Mr. Panos Moumtzis, Regional Refugee Coordinator for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said unfortunately, the dramatic deterioration of the situation inside Syria was continuing to have serious implications for the region. Three-quarters of those fleeing were women and children.

As of today, (9 April) the figures had reached 1.3 million refugees registered. This was a significant increase as 12 months ago, the figure was 30,000. The 1.3 million represented 120 per cent of the planning figure which was thought to be reached by June 2013.

Funding for operations currently sat at 31 per cent as UNHCR had requested \$1 billion for the Regional Response Plan, though only received \$300 million. This acute shortfall meant that a breaking point had been reached. The public services provided by host countries had been stretched to the maximum, or depleted, and they required support from the international community. In addition, the deterioration of the situation in Syria maintained the outflow of refugees, and without support, there were concerns for the regionalisation of the conflict.

Of the 1.3 million refugees registered, 75 per cent of them were in non-camp settlements, and 25 per cent were in 22 refugee camps. The biggest challenge for urban refugees was shelter, and this required the rehabilitation of unfinished buildings and support such as rental subsidies to put a roof over the head of the displaced. This help was offered to around a third of those arriving, and the most vulnerable.

In the camps, there was a concern about the overflowing numbers of residents, so additional camps were being constructed and this work needed to continue. Without the ability to do this then the risk to health of disease outbreaks increased. On food, the World Food Programme had said that it needed \$9.1 million a week to continue its work, while its operations to June were currently underfunded by \$76 million.

On education, programmes had been put in place to offer schooling and without more funding some of these would need to be stopped. Psycho-social support was vital for these children, he said. Looking to registration, he said it was imperative that UNHCR could continue registration, as the process offered those that registered a document to access health and protection.

From the operational point of view, work continued to expand, with additional staff and increased food assistance to respond to the needs of the 200,000 refugees crossing the borders every month. While this was happening now, it was feared that this would not be able to continue without further funding. He called on donors to take action on the pledges made at the Kuwait conference, saying the situation was critical.

Answering questions, he said UNHCR was waiting for the materialisation of the bulk of the pledges made in Kuwait by the Gulf States (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates had each pledged \$300 million for the humanitarian needs of refugees) and it was hoped these would arrive soon. The modality of the pledging process was that the money could be passed to United Nations agencies, though other pledges were made through national agencies. How exactly the aid was delivered was not the concern, it was more that the pressing needs of the refugees were met.

On another point, he said the pace of the development of the Syrian crisis had outpaced the ability of the international community to respond, and there were around five million people in need overall. The planning figures for the rest of the year looked very difficult, he said, and it was possible that the money available for humanitarian assistance would not cover the needs.

The heart of the issue was inside Syria, he said, and there were increasing numbers of internally displaced persons. Funding for work done inside the country by OCHA and others was also needed.

On another issue, he said that UNHCR had a good relationship with Lebanon, and had benefitted from a spirit of openness from the country. Lebanon had not received much attention from the international community and it needed support and recognition for its work aiding Syrians.

Humanitarian agencies were currently completing need assessments and planning for future operations. The outcomes of this were to be presented at a meeting in Geneva on 28 May, which would outline plans going forward and give updated estimates of the number of persons involved. If the current situation continued, it was possible that the number of refugees in the region could double or triple, he said. At the same time, funding constraints meant that that delivering basic support was becoming more difficult.

Asked whether it would not be preferable for Syrians to be provided with assistance within Syria, he said that people fled because of concerns for their security. If the security situation improved, it was thought that 10 to 30 per cent of refugees would return fairly quickly, especially the people from villages near the borders. For those in cities where many homes were destroyed, such return would be more difficult.

Ms. Momal-Vanian added that new figures provided by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia showed that 400,000 houses in Syria had been completely destroyed, 300,000 had been partially destroyed and 500,000 had damaged infrastructure. A total of 1.2 million houses had therefore been damaged or destroyed.

Cécile Pouilly for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) answered a question saying the OHCHR had repeatedly called for crimes in Syria to be investigated and welcomed the Secretary-General's decision to investigate the possible use of chemical weapons. Getting access to the country had been a problem since the beginning of the conflict and so any opportunity to investigate on the ground was welcome.

## **H7N9 China**

Gregory Härtl for the World Health Organization (WHO) said there had now been notification of 24 confirmed cases of influenza H7N9 in China, including seven deaths. These were spread across four provinces, and close contacts of the infected were being closely monitored, though there was no evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission. The family clusters involved were small, one of two people, and one of three people. Of the 24 cases, 21 had ended in severe illness or death.

The source of infection was currently being investigated, and the Food and Agriculture Organization had four teams on the ground doing extensive testing of a number of animal species, he said. This had yielded 20 positive samples of H7N9 from poultry markets, with no positive responses from pigs. Two pigeons had also tested positive, though these were in bird markets.

Answering questions, he said no decision had been taken to send WHO staff to China, which was providing the Organization with extensive information. He explained that the Chinese authorities had been re-examining their influenza monitoring, which had brought some mild cases to light, though could not say whether this meant that similar mild cases were widespread and had just not been previously identified. All live markets in Shanghai were closed. Based on the current knowledge everything possible was being done.

On another point, he reiterated the source of the infection was still unclear and so recommendations were difficult to form at this time. He did advise, however, that dead and diseased animals should not be eaten, that chicken should be thoroughly cooked before eating and to practice good hygiene on farms. He added that diseased-looking birds should be avoided, people should exercise social distancing from those that seemed unwell, and persons feeling severely unwell should seek medical attention - particularly if they had been in contact with poultry.

A revision of the pandemic phases would soon be completed, and this situation fell into the "alert phase" of the new system. This meant that there had been sporadic cases of a novel virus with the capability to affect humans. In order to consider moving into a different phase, a number of other criteria would need to be considered in terms of number of cases and the spread of disease, before the constitution of an emergency committee could be considered.

Asked about treatments, he said tests had shown that neuraminidase inhibitors were effective, it was thought that current stockpiles were sufficient, and no requests had been received from China for further stocks. In terms of a vaccine, a suitable vaccine virus was being developed, and this was to take a matter of weeks, not months. A separate decision to be made later was then whether to switch vaccine production over to H7N9.

## **South Sudan**

Cécile Pouilly for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said a UN report, published last Friday, showed that at least 85 people were killed in an attack on a group of pastoralists that occurred near Walgak, in Jonglei State, on 8 February 2013, the majority of whom were women and children.

The human rights investigation, which was carried out on the ground by UNMISS between February 11 and March 1, was able to verify that at least 85 people were killed and confirmed the identities of 69 of them. Some 37 people were also injured and 34 reported missing in the most deadly attack in Jonglei State since the beginning of the 2013 dry season.

A group of armed men, allegedly members of the Murle community, attacked the Lou Nuer pastoralists as they were migrating to grazing areas. A unit of about 40 SPLA soldiers had been deployed to protect the pastoralists but they were insufficient in number and were overwhelmed, suffering casualties.

She called on the South Sudanese authorities to immediately launch an investigation into this gruesome attack and bring the perpetrators to justice in order to end the cycle of violence and prevailing impunity.

While acknowledging the efforts made by the Government to deploy a larger SPLA presence in the area, she also called on the authorities to further strengthen its efforts to protect civilians and to address the deeply rooted and complex causes of inter-communal violence, including the widespread availability of weapons and lack of development. She also called on all communities to exercise restraint and to end senseless violence.

Ms. Momal-Vanian also drew attention to a press conference held in Juba yesterday (8 April) by Hilde Johnson, Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, which made many similar points.

## Central African Republic

Marixie Mercado for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said a special UNICEF-chartered flight carrying over 23 tonnes of essential drugs, obstetric supplies and water tanks arrived yesterday (8 April) in conflict-ravaged Central African Republic capital city of Bangui.

The consignment represented one of the first significant deliveries of relief supplies to the Central African Republic (CAR) following recent weeks of insecurity and looting. Late last month over ten tonnes of materials were looted from United Nations warehouses, she said. UNICEF now estimated that the entire population of the Central African Republic, about 4.6 million people including over 2.3 million children, was directly affected by the conflict due to the collapse of services and law and order.

Reports were being received that hospitals and health facilities had incurred serious losses of medical supplies, equipment and furnishings, sanitation equipment has also been looted and garbage had not been collected in the last two weeks. It was feared that the previous estimate of 13,500 children that would suffer from malnutrition this year was to increase. UNICEF had verified cases of abuses of children's rights by all sides, including recruitment to armed groups, gender-based violence and denial of humanitarian access.

Answering questions, she said arrangements had been made with partners to get the equipment out to health centres, hospitals and other locations as soon as they arrived. In Bangui, there were signs of normality returning, though the security situation remained precarious. Access was still not possible to parts of the northeast, she said. The situation was improving in other areas, though this was not predictable or secure.

On another point, she said aid was very much directed at children, who made up over half the population. This delivery included supplies for safe births, therapeutic supplies for the severely malnourished and water storage equipment to lower their risk as the most vulnerable to illnesses caused by dirty water.

Ms. Momal-Vanian added that the Security Council was to receive a briefing this morning in New York by the Special Representative and the Head of the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the CAR, so more details should be available later.

Fadéla Chaib for the World Health Organization answered a question saying that due to the insecurity prevailing in the Capital Bangui, healthcare delivery to the general population of Bangui was heavily affected. Wounded patients could not access health services. There had been reports of widespread looting of healthcare facilities.

Health needs were critical, as emergency care mainly in Bangui is hampered by non-functional health facilities according to the initial assessments done by Health partners (NGOs).

The precarious security situation is characterized by:

- Limited access to essential healthcare as health workers fleeing violence have left health facilities unable to provide health care
- Lack of medicines, medical supplies and emergency medical assistance equipment.
- A poor disease surveillance system in a context of poor living conditions and a high prevalence of communicable diseases. Indeed, scarcity of drinking water, electricity and basic sanitation is increasing the risk of outbreaks of water-borne diseases.
- Lack of access for humanitarian service providers.

Response:

- WHO provided technical support to the Ministry of Health for setting up a crisis unit to coordinate the health sector humanitarian response.
- WHO and Health Cluster partners provided medicines and emergency surgical supplies to NGOs for

delivery to functioning health facilities.

- UNICEF and WHO prepared an urgent international order for medicines, materials and equipment to facilitate the provision of emergency medical assistance for the next three months.
- A joint initial rapid assessment and inventory of the health services (28 hospitals and 236 health centres) has been initiated for the 22 health districts and the city of Bangui.
- Support the provision of basic health services through NGO partners in healthcare facilities in accessible areas has started.

## Statelessness

Melissa Fleming for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) welcomed the new stateless determination procedure that came in to effect in the United Kingdom this weekend (6 April).

The procedure allowed stateless people, currently living on the margins of society and in legal limbo, a route to be formally recognised as stateless persons and to legalize their presence in the UK. As such, it was a landmark step.

Stateless people often remained in the country they were residing, she explained, though those that did migrate often found their asylum claims rejected and living on the street or in detention. Many countries had now pledged to adopt a similar mechanism to follow the UK's example.

Answering questions, she said that this was important both symbolically and practically and urged other countries to take similar steps. Around 150 to 200 persons a year were affected.

## Mali

Answering a question, Ms. Momal-Vanian said the Security Council was in the process of considering two propositions put forward by the Secretary-General for a United Nations operation in Mali. Discussions were to consider the scope of the mission and its terms of reference.

## Geneva activities

Ms Momal-Vanian said the Committee on Enforced Disappearances was considering the report of Uruguay today (9 April) until tomorrow and the report of France on Thursday (11 April) afternoon and into Friday morning.

Fadéla Chaib for the World Health Organization said WHO and UNICEF were to hold a press conference on Thursday (11 April) at 11:00 in Press Room 1 on their joint strategy to prevent millions of child deaths from pneumonia and diarrhoea by 2025.

Jean Luc Martinage for the International Labour Organization (ILO) said the ILO regional meeting in Oslo was currently taking place, and all press documents from the meeting were being sent to the Geneva press corps should they wish to cover the details. More details were on the ILO website.

He also said a press release was to be issued on a report on human trafficking in the Middle East, published by the ILO Beirut office. This was at the same time as a tripartite meeting in Amman, Jordan on the issue. The study was based on interviews with 650 people, and said complex systems in the region often put people in vulnerable positions to be trafficked, forced to work against their will, or sexually exploited. Interviews were available on request.

Finally, he announced that an analysis from a new ILO study on financial cooperatives was to be distributed on Friday (11 April). This said that institutions such as cooperative banks had stood the rigours of the crisis much better than others in the same sector. It also considered the role of small and medium-sized

organizations in putting an end to the economic downturn.

The representatives of the World Food Programme and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Office also attended the briefing but did not speak.

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The webcast for this briefing is available [here](#).

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