

## UNITED NATIONS' REGULAR PRESS BRIEFING BY THE INFORMATION SERVICE

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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 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, and the International Organization for Migration.

### **Syria**

Adrian Edwards for the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said UNHCR was today reiterating its appeal to all parties to ensure safe passage for convoys delivering humanitarian aid to civilians inside Syria. In the current security environment, several convoys have had to be cancelled or delayed. This was depriving many Syrians of vitally needed help.

UNHCR was working with government and non-government parties to see that aid got through, however right now assistance was only reaching a fraction of the millions in need.

Despite the security difficulties, UNHCR had been working to scale up its operations. Since the start of 2013 there had been aid deliveries to Deir Ezzor, Daraa, Ar Raqqa, Idlib, and Hama. Last year, UNHCR added to its existing presences in Damascus, Aleppo and Al Hasakeh, new facilities in Al Nabak and Homs. This had brought UNHCR closer to many of the centres of concentration of displaced and affected populations.

Currently, the goal was to deliver relief items to at least one million people by June 2013, and UNHCR hoped to reach many more people in the months after that. As of 20 March, relief items had been delivered to over 437,000 people in some of the most affected provinces, including Aleppo, Al Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Damascus, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Hama and Idlib.

The aid included bedding, shelter, household items and clothes. The items were delivered directly by UNHCR or by local NGOs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Four

convoys, one of which was carried out together with other UN agencies, had taken place to the north since the beginning of the year. The most recent delivery went from Damascus to Tal Abiyad in Ar Raqqa province. Seven trucks loaded with 130 tons of aid arrived on 18 March. The trucks were organized by SARC. The World Food Programme also sent four trucks with 5,000 food baskets.

Financial assistance remained an important priority in Syria with 14,607 families in Damascus, Al Hassakeh and Al Nabek given financial support last year. This year 6,400 families in Damascus had received financial assistance. Plans to expand the programme to Homs had been delayed because of insecurity, but it was hoped to begin the programme in the coming weeks.

The working arrangement is that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) coordinated relief efforts inside Syria. UNHCR then led on three sectors: distribution of household items; shelter support (including renovation of shelters, provision of tents and shelter materials); and community services (including home visits, running community centres and manning hotlines). UNHCR also participated in three other groups: education, health, and water and sanitation.

The 70,000 refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia still living in Syria were facing the same hardship and dangers as their Syrian hosts. UNHCR remained committed to assisting and protecting this vulnerable population, many of whom had limited coping mechanisms, particularly as they lost access to jobs and were displaced due to the conflict.

UNHCR had received reports of threats against refugees and abductions. An Afghan refugee was killed when a mortar shell hit his home. Refugee children were particularly vulnerable to suffering psychosocial issues, with many having dropped out of school. Assistance given included financial support, and help with access to healthcare. Resettlement for refugees, including from Iraq, Palestinians from Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan was a top priority for those that cannot consider going home. At least 76,000 Iraqi nationals had returned home since the beginning of the conflict in Syria despite the fact that for many, the conditions back home are far from ideal.

Answering questions, Ms. Momal-Vanian confirmed that the United Nations was to move half of its international staff outside of the country and this included the staff of the Joint Representative, which were being moved to Beirut and Cairo. Some international staff, and national staff, were to remain in Damascus.

Ms. Momal-Vanian said there were approximately 100 international and 800 national

staff in Damascus working with the offices of the Joint Special Representative, the Resident Coordinator, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Food Programme, UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] — the Palestine refugee agency, UNICEF — Children’s Fund, and other UN agencies and programmes. And so, while some would temporarily leave Syria, others were going to be relocated to other locations within the country, bearing in mind the critical life-saving programmes that these colleagues delivered. And they will endeavour to keep humanitarian programmes operational.

She also explained that over the weekend, a number of mortar shells fell in close proximity to, and on the grounds of, the hotel in Damascus housing UN staff. The mortar fire caused some damage to the building and some cars, including one UN vehicle. The United Nations Security Management Team had assessed the situation and decided to temporarily reduce the presence of international staff in Damascus due to security conditions. She also reiterated that a reduction in staff did not translate to a reduction in assistance.

Mr. Edwards added that there were only a small number of international staff to be withdrawn and UNHCR still had around 340 national staff in the country.

Commenting on the numbers of staff given, Jens Laerke for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said the number of staff in Syria continually fluctuated, depending on the functions needed to maintain vital programmes. There were currently four members of OCHA staff in Damascus. Asked about the pledges of funding made for the country, he said \$384 million had now been received. The Syria Humanitarian Response Plan was still only funded to 30 per cent, he said. OCHA had spoken out regularly over the last two years about the catastrophe unfolding and had made efforts to ask for, and negotiate access.

Elisabeth Byrs for the World Food Programme (WFP) said this was not the first time that relocation had occurred and had still managed to maintain operations. There was a concern about the increasing violence, road closures and fighting, she said. Those being removed were those who could work remotely. There were currently 19 international staff in-country and around 80 national staff. Eight staff were to be temporarily relocated to Amman. On funding, she said that WFP currently needed \$19 million a week to cover the costs of food needs in Syria. The funding shortfall was currently over \$140 million. The food baskets provided were for five people.

Marixie Mercado for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said as of yesterday they had 60 staff including 18 internationals in Syria. Since the outset of the crisis,

UNICEF had worked to establish and expand partnerships with NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) inside Syria. So the massive vaccination exercise which reached 1.5 million children was carried out by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and local partners; the 50 mobile health teams providing services in conflicted affected areas are run by local partners, and the operation to bring in supplies to treat water for 10 million people is not staff-intensive. Their operations remained very much intact.

Asked about the decision by Jordan to close its border Mr. Edwards said 1,644 people had crossed last night and agreed that one part of the border was impassable, though refugees were just taking other routes. Refugees were a vulnerable population, he said, and UNHCR's role was to try and avoid them falling into a more precarious situation. Convoys were going into the north of the country, he said, though there was no place in the country where UNHCR thought sufficient aid was arriving.

The problem UNHCR was facing, above all other, was insecurity, he explained which was making it difficult to get aid through. Then there were the issues of negotiating safe passage for aid convoys, which required negotiations with a large number of actors. Law and order was an issue, with cases of looting reported.

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) also agreed that refugees were still arriving for IOM transport to camps.

Fadéla Chaib for the World Health Organization (WHO) said there were a number of WHO experts suited to taking part in the investigation into the potential use of chemical weapons and no selection had yet been made as the overall mandate of the mission had not yet been clarified.

## **Thailand**

Adrian Edwards for the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said the death toll from last Friday's fire at a refugee camp on the border with Myanmar had risen to thirty seven. In addition, 2,300 people had lost their homes.

The fire broke out in Ban Mae Surin camp in Mae Hong Son province on Friday afternoon. It spread quickly to destroy more than 400 homes, a boarding school, clinic, warehouse, community facilities as well as government and aid agency offices. Refugees with serious burns had been taken to local hospitals.

The Thai authorities were investigating the cause. They were also leading relief efforts in the government-administered camp, working closely with UNHCR and NGOs. The

survivors are being provided with food and drinking water.

Temporary health services had been set up and the IRC was working with Thailand's Ministry of Public Health to provide psycho-social counseling to the affected population. Some of the refugees had moved in with their relatives in the camp.

Families sleeping near a river that runs through the camp were being advised to move to minimize the risk of disease outbreak.

Discussions were ongoing on the location of temporary sites as people were currently too traumatized to rebuild their homes in the affected areas. The Border Consortium was repairing communal buildings and spaces including a school and football field to host some families. The IRC was to set up toilets at these temporary sites.

UNHCR has meanwhile sent some 60 family-sized tents, more than 800 plastic sheets and 1,200 blankets and sleeping mats to the camp. The authorities and NGOs were also providing mosquito nets, clothing and other supplies. UNHCR and its partners were working to identify vulnerable refugees among those affected by the fire, including pregnant women, unaccompanied children and the disabled.

Ban Mae Surin refugee camp was established in 1992 and hosted some 3,500 refugees mostly from Kayah state in eastern Myanmar. It is one of nine border camps in western Thailand housing an estimated 120,000 refugees from Myanmar.

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said IOM had deployed two trucks to the camp to distribute drinking water and clothes, as well as to ferry injured persons to hospital. It appeared that the fire was started by sparks from a cooking fire, he said.

## **Myanmar**

Adrian Edwards for the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) answered a question saying UNHCR was not working in the area of Myanmar which had seen the latest round of violence, though UNHCR representatives were to visit shortly and further updates may be available afterwards.

Ms. Momal-Vanian added that a joint UN-NGO rapid assessment team was deployed to the area, consisting of staff from UNICEF, WFP and OCHA, as well as NGOs.

## **Central African Republic**

Marixie Mercado for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said UNICEF was operating with a slimmed down operation in the Central African Republic after the evacuation yesterday to Yaounde, Cameroon of all but four international UNICEF staff members. Sixty-five national staff members remained in the country. This had happened in a context where many communities have not seen a humanitarian worker in months.

About 600,000 children had been affected by the conflict across the country. During missions to Kaga Bandoro, Bossangoa and Bambari earlier this month, UNICEF noted shortages in life-saving medicines in all three towns. Health activities had been seriously disrupted, as most doctors have left. Many schools were closed, occupied by armed groups, or without teachers, depriving at least 166,000 children of access to education. An estimated 13,500 children were expected to suffer from life-threatening malnutrition this year, and many nutrition centres had been closed and looted.

Other major risks to children included recruitment into armed groups, and gender-based violence. Most vulnerable were children who had lost their homes, had been separated from their families, or were formerly associated with armed groups. Even before the current crisis, UNICEF estimated that some 2,500 children, both girls and boys, were associated with armed groups in the Central African Republic. Since the outbreak of conflict, UNICEF had received credible reports that rebel groups and pro-government militias had recruited children.

Over the past months, access had been extremely difficult or impossible, with roads blocked, the presence of armed groups, and the risk of pillage and attacks. UNICEF offices in Kaga Bandoro were completely looted. Funding was also a constraint. Before the outset of the crisis, humanitarian agencies launched a \$129 million appeal for emergency assistance in 2013. To date, only 1 per cent of this much needed funding had been received. UNICEF looked to expanding its humanitarian operations as soon as security and stability allowed.

Answering questions she said four international staff remained in Bangui, as well as 65 national staff. Many people were reported to be injured, there was little electricity, no water and UNICEF staff were currently housed in the United Nations compound. Access to the country had been difficult if not impossible, and many basic services had shut down.

Asked about the number of refugees in the country, Adrian Edwards for the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) later clarified there were 16,877 as of 15 March. These were refugees mainly from Sudan and DR Congo. Again, access was an issue.

Ms. Momal-Vanian added that the Security Council had released a press statement last night which had been distributed.

## **Guinea Bissau**

Elisabeth Byrs for the World Food Programme (WFP) said WFP Guinea-Bissau was urgently seeking donors' support of \$7.1 million to provide urgent food and nutrition assistance to 278,000 people countrywide throughout 2013.

Over the past few years, Guinea-Bissau, has been of the world's poorest countries (176 out of 187 countries on the 2011 Human Development Index) and WFP had not received any donor support for the operation. This assistance was due to start 1 March, 2013 but operations were stalled by the lack of funding, and currently on stand-by.

In 2012, WFP reached 211,300 beneficiaries and in 2013 WFP's school feeding programme intended to provide meals to 85,000 children from 510 primary schools. WFP will provide a take home ration to girls as an incentive to help improve enrolment and retention. A take home ration, consisting of four kilogrammes of rice per month with a transfer value of \$38 was to be provided to girls with 80 per cent attendance.

Global acute malnutrition rates in the country were considered "poor" at six per cent nationally, up to eight per cent at the regional level, she said.

## **IOM activities**

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said IOM Djibouti was urgently appealing for \$5 million under the UN Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) 2013 to be able to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to a growing number of vulnerable, stranded Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti.

IOM Djibouti had received no funding under the CAP to date, despite the continuing need to support vulnerable migrants, particularly the women, who were increasingly being abused. The \$72 million sought by humanitarian agencies in Djibouti under the 2013 CAP was currently only 6 per cent funded.

IOM also runs a Migrant Response Centre (MRC) in Obock, which currently provided counselling services, hygiene promotion and medical support though this was now overstretched.

He also announced that IOM Haiti had received additional funding of \$100,000 from the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), to continue a programme that began in 2009 aimed at discouraging dangerous irregular migration from Haiti's North-Western coast. With this new funding, IOM was to provide direct assistance packages to 300 returned migrants. This was to include reception assistance, registration, transportation, and temporary accommodation and medical assistance, if needed.

The new funding was to allow IOM to continue building on the initial program which focused on providing direct assistance to irregular migrants intercepted at sea and returned to Haiti, while strengthening the Haitian Government's capacity to address irregular migration in targeted communities along the North-Western coast. IOM was to also continue its information campaign using the local media to broadcast a radio soap opera *Chimen Lakay* or *The Way Home*, to alert residents to the risks of irregular migration,

The North-Western region of Haiti is among the most impoverished in the country, regularly hit by destructive hurricanes and tropical storms, and a major area of irregular migration by boat to the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, Cuba and the United States. During the initial phase, also funded by PRM, the IOM assistance also included income-generation activities and support to local businesses, which benefited some 22,000 people in the target communities.

### **Angelina Jolie**

Answering a question, Adrian Edwards for the [High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) confirmed that film star Angelina Jolie, was currently travelling in an official capacity as a UNHCR Special Envoy with the British Foreign Minister to raise awareness of issues of sexual violence.

### **Geneva activities**

Ms. Momal-Vanian said the [Conference on Disarmament](#) held a debate this morning on "negative security assurances," related to effective international arrangements to assure States without nuclear weapons are not threatened with their use.

The [Committee of Human Rights](#) would complete its work Thursday and concluding observations on the reports reviewed should be made public at the end of the day. The Committee considered reports from Angola, Paraguay, Peru and Chinese regions of Hong Kong and Macau. The Committee also discussed the situation in Belize, who had never



submitted a report.

She continued by saying that the 23rd round of the Geneva International Discussions took place on 26 and 27 March 2013. After the meeting tomorrow, on 27 March, a series of press conferences would take place in Room III. The press conferences were to last approximately 30 minutes each, starting with Philippe Lefort, European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and for the crisis in Georgia, Antti Turunen, United Nations Representative to the Geneva International Discussions and the Joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism and Andrii Deshchytsia, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for Conflicts at approximately 5:00 p.m. (time TBC). Following this came Davit Zalkaliani, First Deputy Minister, MFA, Georgia; and Grigori Karasin, Deputy Foreign Minister, MFA, Russia, respectively.

She also reminded correspondents that Friday (29 March) was an official holiday and no briefing would be held. The next scheduled briefing was 2 April.

Fadéla Chaib for the World Health Organization (WHO) said on World Health Day (7 April) the spotlight would be turned on the global health problem of hypertension. A note was available at the back of the room giving a number of facts on the prevalence and causes of the condition. Activities were to begin on 3 April, at 11:30 with an event at the WHO, featuring a speech from WHO Director-General, Dr. Margaret Chan. At 2:00 p.m. a press point was planned with experts on the topic. A document had been prepared giving details of the condition, its cause and preventative actions which was to be released on Thursday (28 March) under embargo.

Answering a question she explained that a new tool could be accessed online which took various details about a person's life and attempted to gauge their potential risk of suffering hypertension. Asked about the impact of the WHO since its creation, she said it had helped countries to establish better health systems and put in place some important treaties, such as the Framework Convention against tobacco. In the field of public health smallpox had been eliminated following a considerable effort from a number of actors. The campaign to fight polio continued, as did efforts to diminish the impact of non-communicable diseases. The campaign to ensure every person had universal health cover was also important.

Hans Von Rohland for the International Labour Organization (ILO) said the Administrative Board of the ILO finished next Thursday (4 April). Today there a session of the committee on trade union freedom, which looked at a report considering 49 specific cases in five countries, to be later adopted in a plenary session. A press release was to be issued.

Samar Shamoon for the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) said on Thursday, (28 March) at 11:30 a.m. in Press Room 1 there was a press conference on the results of WIPO's International Survey on Dispute Resolution in Technology Transactions. The speaker was Francis Gurry, WIPO Director General. A press release and copies of the report were to be distributed tomorrow (27 March) under embargo.

She also mentioned that the Indian Minister for Commerce and Industry was to visit WIPO on April 8 to present India's instruments accession to the international trademark system, take part in a high-level policy dialogue and giving a keynote address on "Innovation in development - the Indian experience." A press encounter was planned from 12:30 to 12:50.