

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 World Food Programme, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Organization for Migration.

Syria

Adrian Edwards for the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said with the Syria crisis now into its third year, and refugees continuing to cross borders to neighbouring countries in large numbers, pressure to accommodate refugees was growing.

UNHCR was particularly concerned at the present situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where refugees were arriving at a rate of 800-900 people per day – double the rate of just three months ago. The need for space for new camps, and to decongest existing camps was of paramount importance. The situation at Domiz camp, in northwest Iraq's Dohuk Governorate, was especially worrying. The Domiz camp currently housing around 35,000 Syrian refugees and was critically overcrowded. Thousands of families were sharing tents with newly arrived refugees as almost 3,500 families do not have their own shelters.

The crowding was in turn having an impact on sanitation, which was already below humanitarian standards. Congestion and warmer temperatures were increasing vulnerability to outbreaks of diseases as well as to tension between camp residents. The number of children below five years of age suffering from diarrhoea in the camp had doubled in recent weeks: Since February, on average nine children out of every hundred

suffer from diarrhoea per week. Additionally, there have been 62 cases of Hepatitis A since the beginning of the year. UNHCR, UNICEF and WHO were conducting a joint assessment to address the observed increase.

UNHCR had been working with the Government of Iraq and authorities in Kurdistan since last October with a view to ensuring the allocation of more space. The hospitality and support to Syrian refugees demonstrated by the Government and the people of Iraq had been extraordinary. UNHCR was encouraged by a recent decision of the Governorate of Erbil and Suleymania to allocate more space. However, the allocated space can accommodate only 25,000 people - or only one third of the need.

As of 28 of March, 121,320 Syrian refugees had registered in Iraq. More than 90 per cent were hosted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Most new arrivals were families from Qamishli city, while others come from Hassakeh, Aleppo and Damascus. While refugee camps had been established at Al Qa'im and Dohuk, more than 60 per cent of registered refugees in the Kurdistan Region were being hosted by Iraqi communities.

As of 28 March 1,217,782 Syrians had been registered or were awaiting registration in the region. Registration was a key tool through which refugees were identified, protected and assisted, and UNHCR had introduced extraordinary measures to expand registration capacities. These had included the establishment of new registration centres, double shifts, and emergency procedures, resulting in a significant reduction of the waiting period.

Elisabeth Byrs for the World Food Programme (WFP) said the growing cycle of violence in Syria was preventing life-saving food aid from reaching many of the millions of vulnerable Syrians in need.

WFP had reached close to two million people in March with food assistance in Syria's 14 governorates but continued to face enormous challenges reaching certain areas of Rural Damascus, Quneitra, Dara'a, Deir Ezzor, Al-Raqqa, and many parts of the north of the country, particularly Aleppo and Idlib.

It had become a struggle now to move food from one area to the other with warehouses and trucks increasingly caught in the crossfire, she said, calling on all parties to allow humanitarian aid to pass safely into disputed and conflict zones and to be allowed to work. Since the beginning of the operation in December 2011, WFP had recorded over 20 attacks on its food trucks, warehouses and cars.

Recently, a mortar fell on a WFP warehouse in Adraa, on the outskirts of Damascus.

WFP staff were unable to recover the food because of continued shelling and insecurity on the ground.

Nevertheless, WFP was to attempt to send food to 2.5 million people across the country in April and appealed to all parties to respect and observe humanitarian principles and to guarantee the safe passage of staff, aid trucks and our humanitarian partners' personnel. To do this WFP needed \$19 million every week to support its Syria response, which aimed to feed WFP needs \$19 million every week to support its Syria response, which was aiming to feed 2.5 million people inside Syria and close to one million refugees in neighbouring countries.

Answering questions she said that no-one had been hurt in the attacks on trucks which she mentioned, though some drivers had been kidnapped for a period of time and then released. Sometimes the food assistance inside the trucks was recovered, she said, though not always. The drivers were dedicated and would continue their job despite the huge challenges.

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said the IOM was active both inside and outside Syria and had last week assisted 11 vulnerable migrants from Ethiopia, Vietnam and Bangladesh to return home. In addition, 229 refugees, including Sudanese, Somalis and Eritreans were assisted to relocate in the USA, Sweden and other locations.

A site in rural Damascus was currently being assessed in the hope of housing 200 internally displaced persons. In Jordan, the main activities were in transporting people from the border to refugee camps and more than 230,000 had so far been offered assistance. He also mentioned that 200,000 Syrians had been screened for tuberculosis (TB) and 30,000 had been provided with TB awareness.

Yemen

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said severe funding shortages had adversely affected IOM assistance to thousands of stranded and destitute undocumented Horn of Africa migrants in northern Yemen.

In January, IOM had to scale back free meals at its Migrant Response Centre (MRC) in the northern town of Haradh, from 3,000 meals a day to 300. Food was now only distributed to the most vulnerable – women, the elderly and unaccompanied minors. Shelter capacity and medical referrals had also been also reduced, resulting in increased hardship and illnesses among the migrants. Currently, the Haradh hospital mortuary was

filled with the unclaimed bodies of migrants.

In addition, IOM had suspended its voluntary repatriation programme because of the lack of funds. The last IOM-sponsored flight to carry migrants from Yemen was in September 2012, when 210 migrants were voluntarily repatriated to Ethiopia, following a \$2.1 million donation from the Netherlands government.

This happened at a time when the influx of migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa had doubled from around 53,000 in 2010 to over 107,000 last year. Most new arrivals were.

In Haradh town, which the migrants see as a gateway to Saudi Arabia and beyond, thousands of migrants roamed the streets and slept rough in the open with no money for food or medicine. They included single women, unaccompanied minors, the elderly and the sick – most of whom were desperate to return home. Many migrants been rescued from traffickers and smugglers and were injured, some with broken limbs.

Answering questions, he said the number of people coming from Ethiopia was increasing, despite campaigns to try and spread awareness of conditions in Yemen. People were desperate and although some of them possibly knew what was happening they were still travelling. He then suggested that both long and short-term measures should be taken to deal with the problem, such as a restriction on travel and laws to punish traffickers. He also explained that the border to Saudi Arabia was very difficult to cross, which caused the build-up of hopeful migrants in the nearest border town.

H7N9

Answering a question, Fadéla Chaib for the World Health Organization said the China Health and Family Planning Commission had notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of three cases of human infection with influenza A(H7N9).

The cases were laboratory confirmed on 29 March by China CDC Laboratory. The cases were reported from Shanghai (two cases) and Anhui province (one case). All three cases presented with respiratory tract infection with progression to severe pneumonia and breathing difficulties. Disease onset was between 19 February and 15 March 2013. Two of the cases died. The third case was currently in critical condition.

To date no epidemiological link between the cases had been identified. In terms of follow-up, the Chinese authorities were monitoring 88 people who had been in contact with the infected persons. They were also investigating a number of aspects, and had

instituted enhanced surveillance, laboratory strengthening and training for health care professionals on detection, reporting and treatment.

WHO was in contact with the national authorities and was following the event closely, she said. No human-to-human transmission had yet been found. Updates would be issued by WHO as new information became available. So far, the mode of transmission and the number of cases was unknown and more information was needed.

Senegal

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said IOM Senegal was organizing the return and family reunification of 36 trafficked children who survived a fire in a Koranic school in Dakar.

They were rescued in early March by Senegalese social workers and brought to a government-run shelter. IOM subsequently provided food and health services, coordinated emergency assistance and organized the return of those children originating from outside Senegal. The operation was funded by the U.S. State Department.

Trafficking in persons

Jumbe Omari Jumbe for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said IOM had issued a new report on the increasing cases of trafficking in persons and people smuggling in Papua New Guinea.

At the same time, IOM had organized a training for civil society organizations on the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking in Morocco. As Morocco moves from being a country of emigration to one of transit for West and Central African migrants trying to reach Europe, incidences of human trafficking appear to be on the increase. The workshop, requested by Caritas, was funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation.

Arms trade treaty

Ms. Momal-Vanian said that although the final United Nations Conference on the Arms Trade Treaty failed to reach an agreement last week, the treaty text was to be submitted to the General Assembly today, (2 April) for adoption.

Geneva activities

Ms. Momal-Vanian said on the occasion of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action (4 April) a round table was to be held entitled “Actors in Mine Action Challenges and opportunities in today's world”, Thursday 4 April 2013, 1.00 p.m. to 2.30 p.m. in Room XII. The Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and the Director of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), Ms. Agnès Marcaillou, were to attend. A press conference was also planned for 2.45 pm in Press Room 1 with Ms. Marcaillou.

She also mentioned a round table entitled “Technology, innovation and multilingualism,” tomorrow (3 April 2013), from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m., Room XII, Palais des Nations, Geneva. Participants included the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunications Union, Dr Hamadoun Touré.

Today (2 April) was World Autism Awareness Day, she added. Reading an excerpt from the message of the Secretary-General she said, the occasion, “had succeeded in calling greater international attention to autism and other developmental disorders that affect millions of people worldwide. The current session of the United Nations General Assembly had adopted a new resolution on this issue, demonstrating a commitment to help affected individuals and families.

... The Executive Board of the World Health Assembly will also take up the subject of autism spectrum disorders at its forthcoming session in May... The General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting on 23 September to address the conditions of more than one billion persons with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorders.”

Ms. Momal-Vanian then reminded correspondents of a press conference tomorrow by the World Health Organization (WHO) on hypertension, tomorrow (3 April) at 2.00 p.m. in Press Room 1. Speakers were Dr Oleg Chestnov, Assistant Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health, WHO and Dr Shanthi Mendis, Director, Department for Management of Non-communicable Diseases, WHO.

Hans von Rohland for the International Labour Organization (ILO) announced ILO's 9th European Regional Meeting from 8 to 11 April 2013 in Oslo, Norway. A report had been prepared for consideration and an update was to be issued just before the meeting itself. During this meeting, (8 April) there was a panel at 11:30 of Heads of State and Government which included Mr. Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway and Angel Gurría, the Secretary-General of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

On Tuesday (9 April) at 10:00 am there was a high-level panel featuring a number of

representatives of international organizations, including the ILO and the European Commission, which was to discuss policies to grow employment, with a global perspective. Other panels on the agenda included ministers of employment and finance. Accreditation could be requested by contacting the ILO press office.

The representatives of the United Nations Children's Fund and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also attended the briefing but did not speak.