

ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment - Informal Briefing to Member States
14 May 2020, 1100-1230 (NY time)

Statement by Ms. Reena Ghelani, Director of Operations,
UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, New York

[as delivered]

Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting me today to discuss the humanitarian situation today particularly on the impact of COVID 19 in humanitarian contexts.

Excellencies,

Globally, we are grappling with a pandemic which continues to evolve, causing fear, anxiety and deaths in almost every country. Where it has not impacted directly large numbers of people, its sheer threat has led to a major impact on the most vulnerable in the world.

This is an exceptional situation that requires extraordinary solidarity and global measures.

While the advanced economies are most impacted today with a devastating loss of life, we are seeing the number of cases rise in fragile states. Many experts believe the worst is to come in 3 to 6 months from now in terms of the health impact. A lot is not known, we hope for the best and support governments where asked to prepare for the worst.

Despite the low numbers of COVID cases in many of the country's humanitarians work in, the impact of containing the virus, like all over the world is being felt now. The activities and voice of ECOSOC for the millions of people who rely on the worlds support is even more pressing and needed. It is only together we can defeat this common battle.

Mr. Chair, I will focus on the impact of the pandemic, many of which Mr. Chair you have referred to; and how we are collectively addressing new challenges;

The Secretary General's report outlines clearly the pressing needs of many of the worlds' vulnerable last year. At the turn of this year, the picture was not much better even without the impact of the pandemic yet felt. The humanitarian community assessed that over 100 million people would need humanitarian assistance to survive.

We have seen in many places the year start with increased conflict resulting in even more displacement, the spread of locusts threatening millions of livelihoods, and food insecurity increasing in many parts of the world. Even cyclic natural disasters seemingly arrived with even stronger force. Today we are supporting people in several countries impacted by severe flooding.

Several experts suggest that cyclones in some regions could be even more brutal this year.

These needs must not be forgotten. We must continue to provide assistance and protection to this incredibly vulnerable group of people. If we do not, compounded now with a layer of shocks due to the pandemic many people will slip out of reach and more people will die.

We are supporting governments in many countries to respond to the direct health impacts as the number of people affected by COVID 19 increases. However, as many countries prepare to respond to the health crisis the secondary impact on humanitarian action is being felt immediately.

Supply chains are strained and access to services as well as supplies are difficult. Not only health related supplies. We have seen major disruptions to essential health services. We can expect an increase in measles, malaria, cholera and other disease as vaccinations are put on hold and medical supply chains are disrupted. UNICEF estimates that some 117 million children in 37 countries may not get immunized on time. And for example, a reduction of 25% in TB case detection of 3 months may result in an additional global 190,000 TB deaths.

Food security is also severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. As WFP has warned, the number of people on the brink of starvation could almost double from 135 million in 2019 to 265 million in 2020 due to COVID-19-induced socio-economic impacts.

Instability and violence have also increased. Over 40 countries have reported an increase in the number of organized political violence, including from non-state armed groups, since the declaration of the pandemic in March.

There are also very concerning protection concerns being compounded. As the Secretary General noted in his report, sexual and gender-based violence is something the world must once and for all address. During the last few months, assessments suggest that for every 3 months of lockdown, we can expect an additional 15 million GBV cases in the world.

The impact on children is also of great concern with 1.5 billion children out of school, including 743 million girls. In many humanitarian contexts, the impact is immediate as many children simply do not have access to on-line learning opportunities. However, risks are compounded with protection concerns. Risk of early child marriage and radicalization by armed groups.

We have also seen some increased anti-foreign and anti-aid worker sentiment in many countries, including attacks against health and aid workers whilst conducting COVID-19 activities. We have lost aid workers killed directly as a result of the work in trying to support the response to COVID =19.

More than ever, adherence to international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles as the Secretary General has called for in his report, is vital.

We know that one of the biggest impacts will come from the socio-economic consequences. Poverty levels could in fact slip back dramatically. And hard-earned gains of Member States could be lost, some predict taking us back even thirty years. We are working closely with governments, development actors and international financial institutions to ensure that we are joined up and all working to prevent as much as possible this slide.

Mr. Chair, I will turn briefly to what the United Nations humanitarian agencies and partners are doing.

We are working with governments and partners at the very local level to try and out pace this pandemic. We are adapting our operational modalities and exploring innovative approaches, to ensure the safety of the people in need. Those include providing advance rations, new ways of conducting distributions to ensure social distancing, setting up additional water sources and distributing soap in joint distributions.

We are also looking at increasing cash and voucher assistance using existing cash mechanisms and we are scaling up gender programming as we know that COVID-19 will have a disproportionate negative effect on women. We are exploring new approaches to technology to assess and reach people.

Apart from delivering water and sanitation support to millions of people, home school packs to millions of children, food to families who have no other options, we have already provided 2 million health workers with supplies and training as well as other essential supplies in 125 countries.

Due to the challenges to move as airlines have restricted travel, we have established a logistics hub and have flight services and have managed to fly supplies into 30 countries ourselves. Thank you to those governments that have facilitated this movement and the establishment of major hubs. They are essential for getting priority health supplies to governments, but also other humanitarian supplies that are required. As the Secretary General has indicated, aid workers and the supplies, we deliver in many of the countries we work are the front-line workers and are the life saving supplies.

Lastly, let me briefly turn to the humanitarian appeals and financial needs.

Firstly, I would like to thank the generosity of the many governments who have aided the humanitarian response. We have now received over 1 billion dollars against the initial 2-billion-dollar requirement. We have now revised our immediate need in 63 countries covered in a global humanitarian appeal. We now assess we need 6.7 Billion dollars immediately to support the most vulnerable people in the world to meet life saving needs as a result of this pandemic.

The Secretary General has provided 102 million from the Central Emergency Relief fund (CERF) and an additional has been provided through the country-based Pooled funds. We will have to update this appeal as the needs evolve and due to the rapidly and unpredictable nature of the pandemic and its consequences.

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, let me finish by reiterating that the important work of ECOSOC, the chosen theme and panels the member states have chosen for this year on could not be more relevant and essential than today.

[END]