

ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment High-Level Panel on “Health Care in Times of COVID-19: a global protection agenda”

Wednesday 23 June 2021, 15:00-17:00, Geneva, Hybrid format

Opening Remarks for Ambassador H.E. Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations and Vice-President of ECOSOC

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to open and welcome you to this first and very important high-level panel at the 2021 Humanitarian Affairs Segment focused on health-care in the times of COVID-19: a global protection agenda.

Together, we will examine some of the most urgent health challenges for humanitarian action, including underlying social and health inequities, vaccine equity, as well as general access to basic health services, including for routine immunization in times of pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded humanitarian needs in some of the worst and most complex emergencies, requiring more resources and making humanitarian responses more complex.

Children, especially girls and children with disabilities, internally displaced persons, refugees and migrants are severely affected. They are vulnerable to recruitment and use by armed forces or groups, to sexual exploitation and abuse, child labour, trafficking, and early and child marriage. The exposure to risks and the protection needs have only increased, especially for children and in particular for girls, over the last year.

School closures have increased protection risks and reversed gains in education globally, particularly for millions of girls at risk of not returning to school. Disruption to health, water and sanitation, nutrition services and postponement of immunization left millions of children at risk of preventable disease and acute malnutrition.

Attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including humanitarian and medical staff, hospitals, schools, and water and sanitation systems, have led to unnecessary death, injury, illness, hunger, and displacement. These attacks also further weaken already very fragile health systems needed to tackle the pandemic globally.

Rising insecurity and access restrictions are a serious concern. Parties to armed conflict have continued to impede access to medical care, including through attacks against medical personnel and facilities, threats, and intimidation.

These are of course only some of the challenges facing humanitarian actors for health care in times of COVID-19. The humanitarian system stayed and delivered in the face of these challenges over the past 15 months and I want to commend the Emergency Relief Coordinator, all of the members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and international and local partners. I would like to pay special tribute to the local responders who were crucial in the response. I also want to thank the World Health Organization for its tireless leadership and work in the overall global health response.

This coordination and collaboration among the humanitarian system - and your determination - is essential in the fight against this pandemic. We stand in solidarity with you and with the most vulnerable people you serve.

Turning to today's discussion, this high-level panel is about the response the humanitarian community is mounting against the pandemic, and the protection issues that so complicate the response to its effects in many places.

Our panelists will offer perspectives on how we can tackle these challenges brought upon us by COVID-19 and the global humanitarian response to it. I hope to hear how we can more effectively bring on board local actors, building on best practices in local and community engagement and risk communication, and partnering in vaccinating vulnerable communities.

Our discussions today will also offer perspectives on how we can learn from the COVID-19 response to foster greater collective efforts and inform prevention and preparedness for any future large-scale outbreaks or pandemics.