



## High Commissioner's ExCom briefing on UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and operational priorities

3 June 2020

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### Filippo Grandi

- For UNHCR staff, very gradual return to the office in Geneva on a voluntary basis and with very strict rules of working together in this space.
- UNHCR has more than 400 offices in the world. We are now at a moment in this crisis where situations are different from place to place. We have places like Geneva, Copenhagen, and others. There are operations in which the pandemic is on the rise and expanding such as in Latin America, in South Asia, and other parts of the world.
- It is a diverse situation that we have to deal with at the moment, working in different places, but one thing is clear as indicated by the UN SG: we stay and deliver, wherever it is.
- Thank all governments who have been helpful in different ways in allowing our colleagues' movement even during lockdowns, helping with medical evacuations, with the transport, etc.
- We have not observed a major outbreak of COVID-19 in any large refugee situation but in the last couple of weeks, we have seen a rise in cases of COVID among refugee populations and in particular where refugees and displaced populations are in the community. In particular in Latin America, which is now one of the epicenters of the pandemic, in urban centers in Africa, in South Asia, in Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- Challenges continue to exist.
- Plea for refugees, displaced people, stateless to be included in States responses put in place. We have observed practically everywhere an inclusion of the people of concern in particular in the health response.
- UNHCR's role has been to support governments in four key areas:
  - 1) Mobilization of additional resources.
  - 2) Provision of supplies and expertise, operational capacity wherever the government needed it.



- 3) Mobilization of partners on the broader responses to the COVID crisis, in particular on the economic side in order for the displacement dimension to be taken into account.
- 4) Working with all of you to safeguard the protection that we have been working on for years.

#### **On resource mobilization:**

- We are part of the broader humanitarian appeal. UNHCR part is funded at 1/3 of its total requirement of 745 million.
- Our priority has been to move resources quickly to the field or to the central procurement of supplies like protective equipment that was necessary for the field.
- On the funds raised, on 238 million we have been able to move almost 190 million. The legitimate question is: is this money all spent? I would say spent in the case of procurement and in the process of being spent in particular operations.
- It is being spent very rapidly because the needs are extremely urgent especially in the health, sanitation, and water sectors.
- The rest of the money already been received, but not yet used, is being programmed. Part of this funding is earmarked and has less flexibility for reasons we can understand. That money inevitably, because of the inflexibility, will be utilized more slowly. Once again, we request for COVID contributions to be as flexible as possible.
- We are also looking at a number of activities that are delayed, slowed down or sometimes even canceled out of our regular programs because of COVID-19.
- We make sure to reprioritize those resources in order to use them for the responses or activities that are ongoing. We will keep you informed on this.

#### **On the supplies and expertise:**

- We are helping in the actual responses especially in the health, water, and sanitation sectors by prepositioning emergency protective equipment, medical supplies, shelter, or quarantine facility structures, ventilators, the list is very long. It has not been easy and it continues to be difficult to activate supply chains.
- Transport and distribution of procurement particularly to the destinations have been difficult because of the disruptions in international movement of goods and of people but with the help of many governments since a couple of weeks, we are having a good flow of supplies to our operations.
- In some areas, we deployed staff in support of what governments are doing in areas where there are gaps or in context in which there is a large displaced population.
- We have done a lot of community outreach and awareness.
- We have all already seen a massive rise in the needs in the socio-economic sphere.
- The socio-economic impact represents an emergency already everywhere in many places especially where refugees, displaced, stateless depend on daily wages or on the informal economy which is the overwhelming majority of these people.
- It comes together with other very worrying aspects because sudden and fast-rising poverty comes with e.g. an increase of SGBV, exploitation of women; children dropping out of schools.
- The most worrying is the food situation: We are working especially in Africa with WFP which tries to address breakdowns in food pipelines, which also reflect the situation of what I call 'sudden increase in poverty'.
- We have stepped up cash programs. Thanks once again to many countries for their support and encourage those of you who have not yet allowed us to do it or have not yet funded cash programs to consider it.



- Cash programs in the short term are the best way to help people. Hopefully, people will be included in larger social safety nets.

#### **On leveraging partnerships:**

- The work we have done in the past 3 years with all of you around the Global Compact and last year to prepare the GRF has been invaluable. We have been able to build on the partnerships, created especially in the development area.
- The World Bank has been a very good partner. A very important initiative is the contributions made under IDA 19. The next cycle has already been approved. It is of 2.2 billion now. All the contributions made between now and next year for one year and up to a billion dollars will be provided in the form of grants, not loans.
- It is very important that countries eligible to receive IDA 19 under refugee window funds apply to the World Bank. Those grants aim to support countries hosting large numbers of refugees in exchange for inclusion of refugees during the period in social services, social safety nets, etc.
- It is a very important window that has opened up, this is an opportunity to get grants and the Bank exceptionally authorized this because of the COVID situation.
- We are also working with the WB and other institutions on the utilization of financial tools for middle-income countries.
- Countries in the Middle East, e.g. Lebanon and Jordan, in South America with the Venezuelan outflow, are very much in need of additional resources but because they are middle income countries, they are disadvantaged, in that respect, compared to poor countries.
- We are also working very much with regional development banks, in Asia, in MENA, e.g. we are pioneering with the African Development Bank, very interesting projects in Sahel countries linked to the COVID-19 response, looking in particular at livelihoods and other developmental issues.
- We are also in dialogue with many bilateral development bodies.
- The private sector has been very active, has risen to the occasion and given us some very interesting contributions.

#### **On protection:**

- We work with all of you to ensure that measures taken because of health are as temporary as possible and also not excessive.
- Even if borders are closed there are ways to admit people to territories for quarantines and other measures.
- Unfortunately, there are ongoing conflicts in places like Eastern Congo where we have seen people pushing at the borders of neighbors such as Uganda, South Sudan.
- It is important that, difficult as it may be now, we continue to offer international protection to people fleeing conflict.
- 161 countries around the world have closed partially or completely their borders, this is a big challenge but once again make measures as temporary as possible.
- On discrimination and xenophobia, we have 38 operations that have reported cases of discrimination and xenophobia towards refugees and displaced people. I expect this to rise with the increase of the economic impact.
- There has been some return movements, although many repatriation operations are stalled. Our appeal is to let this return be voluntary and spontaneous and let it be managed by all countries concerned in a manner considerate with the health emergency. When people go back to their own country they need to be supported.



- We have also resumed in a very modest way, yet, resettlement movements. We are working with IOM and a number of States on this.
- With IOM we started studying how COVID is impacted in mixed population flows. We published a [discussion paper](#) already on how it affects populations. We have shared it with a number of countries, and we are looking also at how these movements are affecting other parts of the world.
- On the work done around the GCR, we have not forgotten the pledges made at the GRF. We know which pledges are particularly useful to implement in this particular situation and we reach out to those of you who have made pledges to try to match them and accelerate them under the COVID response.
- [The HC Protection Dialogue will be devoted, in December 2020, to the Protection and other challenges linked to refugees during the pandemic](#). The lessons that we have learned, and we can apply, in order to be better prepared for the future.
- We should not forget other situations around the world that are worrying for us. In Eastern Africa, Mozambique, in the central Sahel region, internal displacement has increased, 30% this year. You have all seen the terrible attacks in Niger, Northern Syria continues to be complex, conflict in Libya is not resolved, security in Afghanistan remains fragile, etc.
- Many situations requiring attention and resources. We have had 2 important pledging events, one organized by Spain and the EU for Venezuelan refugees and migrants which was very successful with 2.5 billion dollars of pledges in forms of loans and grants and another pledging conference organized by the UN and by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to mobilize humanitarian responses for Yemen. 1.3 billion raised but far below expectations. I want to echo what the rest of the UN has said, it is important that more pledges come because the situation in Yemen is catastrophic.
- We will have the upcoming Syria Conference organized by the EU at the end of June.
- We are going to present you very soon some additional needs related to the situation of the Sahel. This is something that originates from my visit in February.

#### Chairman

- Could you provide an update on the protection of refugees and asylum seekers?
- To what extent UNHCR guidelines have been adopted on the ground?
- To what extent are we ensuring access and solutions to those who are vulnerable?

#### Gillian Triggs

- There is a decline in respect for the fundamental norms of refugee law, the right of access to asylum, and the right of non-refoulement to places of conflict or persecution.
- The majority of States have fully or partially closed their borders. About 100 States made no exception for people seeking asylum, seriously limiting their rights to seek protection. This has led in some cases to the denial of rescue at sea, denial of disembarkation, boats carrying asylum seekers and refugees have been pushed back. We have also seen a mounting pressure for forcible returns to countries of origin.
- A significant number of States are now derogating from their human rights obligations as temporary measures. A State must act to protect public health and protect its borders but equally, it is possible to protect the rights of asylum seekers. Many States are doing so with quarantine measures, remote processing of asylum claims, and various testing processes.
- Once the pandemic declines, we do ask States to go back to their governments to ensure that measures that were necessary at the time are brought back to an open border and access to asylum processes.



- A significant impact of COVID-19 has been on the most vulnerable people throughout the world among them asylum seekers, refugees, IDPs, stateless.
- They are typically working in the informal economy and the first to go when jobs are lost. This led to increased isolation, traumas for families, psychosocial issues along with the spike in sexual violence.
- We are concerned about the long-term, we are concerned that these economic consequences will exist for some time and concerned that some of the restrictive practices will be baked in if we do not speak up and advocate for the core principles.
- To what extent are UNHCR guidelines being adopted on the ground? UNHCR, through the protection services issue many guidelines, legal advice in assistance to governments to meet the COVID-19 challenges.
- For examples, [The key considerations to access to territory for the persons in need of international protection](#) as well as [Access challenges and the implications of borders restrictions](#) are very simple points and being effective on the ground.
- The [key protection messages](#) are also having an impact beyond the usual entities.
- We are working to simplify messages to make them clearer and more accessible.
- We have many positive examples of cooperation that have been used in light of the guidelines that we prepared.
- Many States are now using remote arrangements for asylum interviews, States are continuing with their registration processes, with new applications and adopting processes to extend the validity of asylum documentation to allow those caught in the COVID context. Often displaced people are able to have a valid regularized status for at least an extended period.
- To what extent are we ensuring access and Solutions to those who are vulnerable?
- UNHCR has risen to this challenge through the development of the use of remote technologies, in particular we have scaled-up the use of hotlines and call centers. E.g. now we are using these technologies to get to people concerned with sexual violence in family situations; Accessing radios in Mali to spread messages where Internet connection is an issue.
- We have seen a much greater level of localization working through community groups and faith-based groups.
- One of the outcomes that will emerge from this, will be the use of local communities, use of technologies. The AHC for Operations is working on new projects to scale-up those technologies to get to wider communities.
- To reaffirm some points that have been made:
  - 1) We hope that resettlement will resume, at least towards the end of June. It depends on flights and connection of flights with the relevant countries and cases. All the background work is continuing. The consideration of those people who are suitable for resettlement have been going forward. 17,000 requests for resettlement have been made, and many States are looking forward to resuming resettlement programs.
  - 2) The HC Dialogue that will be going forward on the basis of protection challenges during COVID. We have now a much greater understanding of the importance of burden-sharing and we hope that as the crisis subsides, we will return to the language, the values, and the principles of the Global Compact.  
Pledges are being assessed. The outcome document sets out the 1400 pledges in detail, and many of them can be slightly repositioned to respond to the health crisis, an important element of solidarity and inclusion.  
The HC Dialogue will deal with lessons learned on protection and preparatory sessions will be organized. We will be doing it remotely, in 3 sessions of 2 hours every alternate



week from October, leading up to a virtual session from the Palais in Geneva. It will produce some very substantive outcomes that will feed into the HC Dialogue. The 3 preparatory sessions will cover: the COVID pandemic and other protection issues that have been continuing; resilience on the idea of inclusion; and climate action and future impacts.

### Chairman

- Could you share your thinking on how UNHCR and its operational responses are changing in light of COVID-19 and how UNHCR envisages a post-COVID-19 way of operating?
- What support is being given to refugee-hosting countries to ensure inclusion and build local capacity?

### Raouf Mazou

- Remember that while COVID-19 is present and we are responding to its effects, we also continue to provide protection and assistance to millions of PoCs worldwide.
- What is different in our work is our approach to the specific groups of refugee populations or situations:
  - 1) The first situation we have seen in the context of COVID which requires particular attention, and that we have addressed, is the situation of PoCs living in camps.
  - 2) The second situation is the urban refugee population. Refugees are living in dense environments where health and wash infrastructures are often overburdened.
- When we did the last ExCom briefing, we did not have at that time situations or cases of refugees being infected in refugee camps or settlements. Now we do have a number of cases. In Cox's Bazar where we have the largest refugee camp in the world, we currently have 29 confirmed cases and unfortunately a day ago we heard about one death. We have about 139 refugees in quarantine.
- In another large camp in Kenya we have 5 cases, and in Kakuma we have one case.
- We received information from about 56 countries, 879 persons of concern who are infected and that includes unfortunately 24 death. These figures have been reported to us, we definitely know there could be other cases.
- What do we do in support of governments? We focus on WASH and public health, increasing community infection prevention and control, and forcing distancing isolation, quarantine measures, preparing health facilities, and treatment centers to manage positive cases with quality clinical care. E.g. in Cox's Bazar we opened at the end of May 2 isolation and treatment facilities with about 200 beds and we hope to reach, by mid-June, a capacity of about 1100 beds. This will contribute to an overall goal of 1900 beds.
- In Kakuma, in Kenya we are enhancing community engagement and awareness-raising which is key and including on board religious leaders, volunteers, and others.
- As for refugees who are living in urban settlements. Suddenly because of COVID and confinement measures refugees find themselves with absolutely no resources and require support. We successfully delivered 30 million of cash assistance because we thought that was the best way to provide assistance in a quick and effective way.
- From the GHRP we have a significant portion of the resources that we require, about USD 284 million, which will be used for cash interventions.
- What is changing and what impact COVID had on the way we operate? It has constituted an accelerator to our cash-based programs. 65 countries worldwide have either expanded their programs or actually started new cash-based programs.
- E.g. in Mexico we now have 80% of the eligible asylum seekers who are provided with a cash-based intervention; In Pakistan in late May we started a program to benefit to 36,000





families, in close coordination with what the government is doing for its own population; In Cameroon, we provided assistance to more than 11,000 refugees in four different urban locations; In Ukraine, we also provide cash protection for persons of concern in Donetsk and Luhansk.

- We do require sustainability because the assistance that is being provided needs to continue to be provided, hence the importance for us to work closely with the World Bank and other IFIs to make sure refugees are included in national social safety net.
- What will be different in post-COVID way of operating? We do not know yet but we have realized the technology improved, e.g. the way in which we interact with refugees, using mobile phones; the new technology available has improved.
- We have realized also that the camp response can constitute a problem because of the congestion and therefore we do hope we are going to have more situations of inclusion rather than to have refugee camps receiving only humanitarian assistance.
- We will have a better understanding of the conditions and situations of refugees living in urban settlements. We will know better how much they contribute to the economy of the country which has welcomed them. There is often an informal sector, but they do contribute tremendously to the economy of the country which has welcomed them.
- A very important aspect of what we tried to do through the GRF, with the Global Compact, was inclusion. Healthcare is definitely an area where in a number of contexts we have been able to accelerate the inclusion of refugees.

#### Chairman

- Is UNHCR considering innovative forms of financing and if so, what are those forms?
- How is UNHCR ensuring that appropriate financial controls are in place now that we have this context of remote working?

#### Kelly Clements

- In terms of the revised appeal that was launched last month, there were several preparedness measures that were anticipated as part of that.
- On issues related to urban areas, what we see in terms of the impact on the socio-economic side for refugees living in host community, in a very dense situation, is another component of that revised appeal.
- In camp settings, we work to put isolation units, field hospitals, deploying some of the housing units that we have available to serve as isolation quarantine facilities.
- A two-way communication protection monitoring is added to a very large component of this appeal.
- On issues related to what our operations are spending on, the implementation rates are very high. High both for ongoing operations with regard to the global appeal for 2020 but also high in terms of the COVID response. We have not seen as much in terms of reprioritization that we expected but we will be coming back to you.
- How will we make sure that partners are able to benefit from some of those resources? This has been a concern for us from the very beginning. We have a situation where we are in the advantage because we were already putting into place a much more flexible system in terms of our partnership to begin with, both in terms of the agreements that are in place, and the reporting mechanisms.
- Our focus with regard to NGOs in particular is both to bolster some of the services that they already provide in relation to COVID-19 but also making sure that we are advancing our normal agreements.



- There is a significant piece that is dedicated to procurement, which would not be viewed as direct from UNHCR to NGO requirement but those supplies goes from our operations to NGO partners.
- Cash-based interventions already have been a significant amount of our spending, i.e. USD 30 million. Those are also areas where we would not necessarily have an NGO partner that would be part of our delivery system but as part of the monitoring, we would expect in the GHRP to see as much more significant part in terms of this revised appeal going to partners.
- The HC is participating in a discussion with the Emergency Relief Coordinator on practical ways so we can make sure that local partners and international partners benefit to a greater extent.
- On budget requirements generally, during our first informal briefing, we foresaw the need for a supplementary budget, which was launched (404 million).
- We also looked at the flexibility that we have through the operational reserve and used a piece of the operational reserve to make sure that we are not increasing a budget to a level that is not necessary in order for us to respond.
- We feel fairly comfortable with regard to where we are in terms of the overall budget, but it does mean that we have exceeded the USD 9 billion level in terms of the budget for 2020. We will be talking about that in a bit more detail in July during the Standing Committee.
- With regard to diversifying and innovating on fundraising. We have had an outpouring of support from business in terms of our approach. We are about USD 25 million higher in terms of private sector fundraising at this stage of the calendar than we were last year and that is both a combination of moving from face-to-face to digital channels but it is also the business in the corporation approach including large donations from companies like *Unilever, Sony*, a very successful Ramadan campaign that resulted in a substantial allocation of additional resources. *UPS* also helped us in terms of deliveries. With the additional element that we have just joined with WHO, UNICEF, and WFP the Solidarity Response Fund which has been a key tool for the private sector to engage with regard to the COVID-19 response.
- There are interesting and new techniques that we are using in terms of innovations to be able to reach colleagues on the ground, with a strong focus on making sure that the programs and the dollars are delivering, the increased risk of fraud for example are met with protections and controls put into place and implemented.
- We put together a comprehensive COVID risk registry, which not only identified some of those risks that we could see in elements of our response from every level but also the middle mitigation measures that can be put and have been put in place.
- Our new Inspector General, who joined us just as we were going into a confinement scenario in Geneva, has engaged with the oversight mechanisms for UNHCR including OIOS, and Evaluation Service.
- The board of auditors has been with us virtually. There are a whole range of approaches and tools that they are putting in place as well as changes to some of their plans for 2020 (for the inability to travel for example).
- We are benefiting from a number of advisory services, informal and formal, different types of audits, keep mapping in terms of where we can look at risks.
- We had a dedicated session recently with our Regional Bureaus to take a look at how these tools could be deployed quickly in their operations.
- In terms of the internal financial controls, the controller has put out a communication in terms of some the risks, warning signs checklists that we should be looking at, reminder of that framework, outline of key business processes, and controls, e.g. management of cash in a bank with CBI programs.





## Q&A

The following stakeholders took the floor during the briefing.

- 1) Egypt
- 2) Netherlands
- 3) Venezuela
- 4) Montenegro
- 5) Sudan
- 6) EU
- 7) Ecuador
- 8) Malta
- 9) Mexico
- 10) Azerbaijan
- 11) France
- 12) Nigeria
- 13) Estonia
- 14) Pakistan
- 15) USA
- 16) Peru

17) ICVA, on behalf of NGOs. Statement delivered available [here](#).

## Filippo Grandi

- To the Netherlands, on staff and how we prepare, most of them continued to work in their duty stations but it is often complicated. We have had about 45 cases of staff members who tested positive. Sadly, one staff member with a preexisting medical condition passed away in Chad.
- Big challenge is to get PPEs for them, for government counterparts, NGOs, refugees.
- Another big challenge has been the availability for staff and partners of Medevac and local medical facilities in case they fall sick. We are part of a much bigger discussion in the UN on establishing medical evacuations speed.
- We are working on a few solutions, some will cost money, some of it will be covered by the GHRP, some will not, and we will come back to you for that.
- Reassure that mental health is very much in the forefront. Recently UNHCR jointly pledged with the International Olympic Committee to reorient most of our joint projects towards mental health.
- To France on resident coordinators. They have been very useful in leading UN country teams in each country. We have been supporting them very strongly. The whole discussion raised on how the coordinators are chosen, deploy, how they operate is evolving positively and very rapidly.
- In the Sahel, steep increase in armed groups activities, in Burkina and Niger in particular. There have been terrible attacks including in a refugee camp in Niger and escalation that goes with displacement and GBV. We have a strategy to address the displacement aspects in the Sahel, which we are beefing up and we are going to present it soon to donors.
- Might have a Sahel humanitarian conference. Some States were interested in sponsoring, but we want to wait for a few months because everything now is focusing on COVID. Meanwhile, we will share our additional needs with donors soon.



- To Pakistan, the World Bank has already agreed that half of the next refugee window will be utilized in the form of grants. States eligible can apply however it is only for one year and for half of the amount of the total window. This is an open discussion.
- I have a telephone appointment with the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in few minutes, it is a unique opportunity for UNHCR. I do not think any HC have had these contacts before. We are reaching out to the big financial institutions to say: when you help States, do not forget that some States have an additional burden because of displacement, refugees and IDPs. This is the message I will pass.
- To Sudan, unfortunately Sudan has some constraints in accessing IFIs funds. We are working hard to overcome that and so become eligible for this type of funding.
- On Libya, I am not optimistic about the situation in terms of conflict. We continue to work with IOM. A lot of our activities are curtailed by insecurity though.
- To Ecuador, tonight after the IMF meeting, I have a meeting with IOM to discuss the follow-up to the conference on the Venezuelan refugees and migrants. We will come back to the most concerned States especially those of the Quito group to keep you briefed on how we, with Canada, will follow-up on the conference.
- We are intending to monitor the disbursement of the pledges that were made. It is true that many were loans or low concessional loans though and also grants.
- To Venezuela, people who return voluntarily deserve to be supported, in Venezuela as in any other places.
- To Mexico, thank you for mentioning good practices. We can use the dialogue, which I have mentioned for December to also look at lessons learned during this period.
- To the USA on resettlement, the fundamental blockage is the absence of travel but once international travels resume, it will be easier. In some countries, we have agreed to continue emergency resettlement cases and we appreciated it.
- To the question on contingency planning in Bangladesh, this is elaborate in fact. I asked the representative in Bangladesh to brief our donors, and he shared some important information on what contingency planning is being made there.
- To NGOs and on NGO funding the point is well taken. I have to signal, however, that 25% was disbursed to NGOs last year, taking more than a quarter of its resources. This year we have already disbursed half a USD billion to NGOs.
- Less money has been given in the context of COVID due to what Kelly explained earlier on the constraints, (constrained procurement, cashing priority, activities that usually we do not engage so much with NGOs). Assure NGOs that there is a usual average between one quarter and one third of resources to NGOs.
- On xenophobia, 38 operations reported cases of discrimination, xenophobia. This is rising and what measures do we take? Essentially this is a State responsibility. We are trying not to separate refugee and host communities when, for example, we have cash transfers to benefit to both.