



UNHCR's meeting with NGOs partners on preparedness and response to Covid-19 in refugee situations

*17 March 2020
Online*

Participants:

UNHCR:

- Raouf Mazou, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations.
- Robin Ellis, UNHCR Deputy Director of the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply.
- Sajjad Malik, UNHCR Director of the Division of Resilience and Solutions.
- Arafat Jamal, UNHCR Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service.

NGOs:

- About 50+ NGOs

Arafat Jamal

- Aim of the meeting is to give an update on what UNHCR is doing and how we are planning.
- Seeking partners' views, concerns, business continuity and contractual arrangements through a consultative process.
- Will not be able to answer all questions today but will continue the dialogue with partners.
- Partnerships is important to us. UNHCR is nothing without our partners; this is part of our Statute and you are an important part of our link to affected populations.
- We are also passing instructions to the field for similar discussions at regional and national levels.

Raouf Mazou

- This is an unprecedented situation. No one has all the answers.
- Having a dialogue today to know more on what is working, what is not working; business continuities; whether you think there is enough inclusion in our contingency planning.
- Aim is to open a dialogue and agree how often to come together. Regional Bureaus are already working but we wanted to have this global-level dialogue as well.

Robin Ellis

- UNHCR is very dependent on the work you do. In unprecedented times, we need to keep in contact to continue functioning.
- Things have evolved very fast over the past week or so.
- UNHCR's Initial focus was on preparedness and how COVID-19 may affect access to health care/facilities.
- Focus rapidly turned to developing a response plan, looking at how we can/need to respond differently.
- Then it became more about business continuity, program criticality, aiming to define what is absolutely essential to deliver without jeopardizing our people of concern, without putting staff at risk and how this may affect partners.
- UNHCR is committed to continue providing assistance.
- Currently working with our country offices to better define how the activities will continue and continue with partners. UNHCR hears about some amazing continued commitments to deliver along with situations where partners had to discontinue their activities. In those situations we look for solution to continue providing services if necessary with reference to program criticality.



- Wish partners can give UNHCR some guidance on what you see and what you need in such circumstances.

Sajjad Malik

- The situation is very fluid and evolving rapidly.
- Geneva HQ is also in an emergency mode, with most staff working remotely but absolutely working, sometimes more than usual.
- Our just established Regional Bureaus are starting to coordinate more robustly, looking at business continuity/program criticality.
- Asia was very much the first region to experience Covid-19 and is developing lessons learned.
- We are dealing with regular programs with refugees and mixed situations (IDPs and returnees; IDPs and refugees)
- Access issues are emerging and sometimes flights are not being operated (e.g. Yemen and Somalia).
- We see immediate and emergent needs on WASH and Health services. We need to ramp up those interventions.
- UNHCR released an [urgent appeal](#) last week, which is already out of date and figures will be revised soon.
- Working closely with WHO, OCHA, NGOs, other partners to make sure the global appeal is comprehensive.
- Refugees in remote areas are at particular risk of being left out from national plan; UNHCR is working closing with States to make sure they are integrated.
- We are sending specific guidance to our offices and Regional Bureaus, also or them to share with local partners. This includes recently endorsed IASC guidance.
- At global level, there is growing concern over logistics and supply, while travel is becoming very cumbersome in many areas.
- Our focus is to reinforce operations at local level and work through local and regional procurements. This is sometimes not possible (e.g. procuring COVID tests) but for ex. soap, WASH etc. can get procured at local levels.
- For technical support at local level, sending experts being extremely difficult due to travel restrictions and bans, UNHCR is also mobilizing expertise at local level.
- Lot of work has to be done with you and through you. Need to hear from you how we reinforce local capacity.
- Working with Humanitarian Country Teams/Resident Coordinators.
- Concern that refugees in remote areas get access to information, so they do not feel isolated and left out.

Q&A

Danish Refugee Council

- One issue we have is guidance on how donors rules will be adapted to these situations, so our offices can be prepared. Which costs will be eligible?
- As we experience more restrictive access for humanitarians, it is increasingly difficult for staff to move. A business contingency plan addressing this would be useful.
- Could UNHCR support partners in terms of visa waivers, in case one needs to leave a country or stay beyond current visa/permit date?

ICVA: What can be done to improve connectivity in camps (cell service, data)? It's impacting contact tracing, among other things. Also, we're hearing anti-NGO narratives emerging. On another note, we'll need new methods of food and WASH NFI distribution – any thoughts on that?



ICVA

- Good to hear the meeting is a start of process. Looking forward to knowing more about modalities for future discussions.
- We received input from ICVA members and can share those in writing with UNHCR.
- Raise concerns from ICVA members about Bangladesh:
 - conditions in the camps are serious issues in their own right, but likely to exacerbate the impact of COVID-19: securitization, lack of mobile data, fencing and the increasing controls on camp access and of course the lack of health infrastructure and density of Cox's Bazar.
 - concerns about an anti-(I)NGO narrative, which has developed among the host-community and Government. Any serious Covid-19 outbreak might exacerbate/be impacted by this. Management of relations between the Rohingya and host communities will also be an issue.
 - All this indicates challenges in terms of prevention/containment of COVID-19:
 - NGOs ability to distribute awareness materials focused on good hygiene practices is severely compromised without the use of mobile data and cell phone access.
 - Providing this information through physical dissemination is not effective/feasible given the sheer number of refugees in the camps.
 - Full cell/mobile data service also needs to be restored to ensure effective contact tracing. At the moment, it is not possible to contact refugees and ask them to self-isolate without physically locating them at their shelter.
 - To ensure containment, food and other item distribution methods need to be modified to avoid high-rate of contacts.
 - Genuine concern that UN agencies and NGOs could lose access entirely as lockdown and quarantine measures are implemented.

Oxfam

- In this context, how can we ensure a more local response, mobilizing and supporting local partners? What about refugee participation and the involvement of refugee-led organizations?
- Funding for local organization: is this something that can be put in place?
- Given the work in refugee settings, physical distance and quarantine is impossible. The existing messages on Covid-19 will have to be adapted. Ebola example.
- Oxfam WASH distribution is thinking of how we can do it more remotely.
- Is UNHCR looking at coordinating communications across agencies? Messaging will be key.

International Medical Corps

- Is there a clear Covid-19 WASH document with hygiene promotion that we can use?

Médecins Sans Frontières

- Situation in Greece is very concerning. For instance in Lesbos, there are only twenty beds available in case of health emergency. Is there an evacuation option in place?
- In Bangladesh, Covid-19 testing is available only in Dhaka.
- After testing, when we will need to isolate people, how will we deal with isolation?

Robin Ellis

- On the actual Medevac, we look at what conditions and duty of care can be deployed for staff.



- We are discussing how UNHCR can be a nimble organization. Decisions should come within 48 hours. Some changes of rules will depend on donors and we refer to the discussion on how UNHCR can be an appropriate donor.

UNHCR

- We are working with internal deployment and stand-by partners for now and reviewing the situation.
- For UNHCR deployment, difficult to assess the situation and monitor individual situations due to States restrictions evolving every day. A next deployment is planned in April 2020.

Robin Ellis

- Stricter access conditions are expected in the coming days/weeks. Expect that there will not be many places accepting travels or transfers from camps.

Sajjad Malik

- We can work to share information on situation in camps.
- UNHCR hygiene and WASH documents available here: <https://wash.unhcr.org/covid-19-resources/>
- IOM, IFRC, UNHCR, WHO is developing guidance. Might be interim guidance that will be updated.
- Communication and interim guidance on social distancing being prepared. In already crowded camps, this will be very difficult.
- We know some partners are not able to travel.
- In Jordan movement toward the camp is already limited. Even in cities it will be a problem.
- Advice is to stay where we are right now: risk of traveling out without being able to come back is very high.
- We have to look at operations by operations. More than ever, need to look at local, national and sub-regional level.

Raouf Mazou

- UNHCR is being more flexible in order to facilitate operations.
- In situation such as Lesvos, we will continue to highlight decongestion need to the authorities, the risks we are talking about is now even bigger. Making sure that the populations that are more at risk are taken out.
- Related to the risk to stigmatize refugees; we will have to be careful in communication.
- To Oxfam, we are planning to bring together, at country levels, discussions on communications.

Arafat Jamal

- On localization, together with OCHA, UNHCR is engaging with donors on level of flexibility and risk allowed.

NRC

- Flexibility is necessary at this time. We need to approach this situation together.

World Vision

- In terms of funding, can we anticipate support for countries to include refugees in their national plans? Are states being reluctant to including refugees in their priorities related to Covid-19?



UNHCR (Rob Hurt)

- UNHCR is actively exploring ways to provide greater flexibility to partners in their operations.
- No details to share yet but we are looking at this closely. Decisions will be communicated in coming days.

Sajjad Malik

- We are working with authorities and health institutions to incorporate refugees in national plans.
- World Bank also using its channels to urge national authorities to include refugees into their national plans.
- IMF and UN advocate for refugee inclusion.

Africa Humanitarian Action

- It is crucial to develop plan for the continuity of basic services and also adequate plans for awareness, implementation, detection, isolation, risk communication. This has to be developed now, do not wait for the outbreak in Africa.

International Medical Corps

- Glimpsed through the UNHCR WASH document, is there anything we should follow on nutrition?
- On the business continuity plan, should we expect our program with UNHCR and PPA to continue?
- How to ensure we are kept informed on UNHCR policies, guidance and updates?
- One idea would be for UNHCR to share information with InterAction and ICVA.

Robin Ellis

- Advice:
 - Be proactive and contact coordination structures or UNHCR offices; let us know if you see any changes; advise on how you would do things differently.
 - Be also proactive on services and goods you deliver.
 - You should also let us know of gaps in service delivery if national services are being suspended.
 - To avoid confusion, start conversations asap.
- Related to nutrition, Covid-19 has little impact on children, in a Covid-19 in humanitarian situation guidance that will come up, there is mention of breastfeeding, if the mother has Covid-19, it is still important to continue breastfeeding as well as important information on pregnant women.

ICVA

- We are talking about refugee situations, but is there a need for specific reflection on IDPs, in cooperation with OCHA and IOM?
- We start hearing that organizations such as EASO have begun teleworking; in France, OFPRA has closed its offices leading to extremely reduced services being provided to persons in need of international protection. We can anticipate this will get generalized. How to mitigate the impact on PoCs? Is this taken into consideration in UNHCR planning?

Arafat Jamal

- UNHCR is seeking USD 33 million to boost preparedness and response to address public health needs of refugees, that can be updated; part of a larger system.
- Meetings with the IASC principals on Covid-19.



- OCHA will prepare an aggregated global appeal; will cover Humanitarian Response Plans situations, covering IDPs.
- This is a beginning, a first dialogue, UNHCR will repeat the meeting in a week, we take notes of request for sharing information.

Raouf Mazou

- We exchanged ideas, views, and concerns.
- We have to continue operating. IDPs should be seen together at higher risk and make sure we have the basic guidelines that are available.
- Working together.
- Concerns raised on the need for additional flexibility. We are looking at that.
- Important comments on communicating together, reference to Ebola.
- What we need is make sure there is business continuity for everybody.
- We want to support country and regional levels.