

Media Update

29 January 2021

United Nations

SECRETARY-GENERAL BRIEFING

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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INFORMAL BRIEFING TO MEMBER STATES ON PRIORITIES FOR 2021

28 January 2021

President of the General Assembly,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2020 was a global annus horribilis – a year of death, disaster and despair.

The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed havoc in every country and every economy.

We lost 2 million lives, including many dear members of our UN family.

The human toll continues to multiply.

The economic costs continue to mount.

500 million jobs -- gone.

Extreme poverty -- back up to levels not seen in a generation.

Inequalities widening.

Hunger rising again.

And global fragilities continue to be exposed.

We have declared war on nature, and nature is striking back.

The climate crisis is raging.

Last year natural disasters caused \$210 billion in damage – and incalculable human costs.

Biodiversity is collapsing.

Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions are undermining our collective efforts for peace.

Humanitarian needs are escalating.

Forced displacement reached record levels last year.

The risk of nuclear and chemical proliferation grows.

Human rights face a backlash.

Hate speech is booming.

Lawless behaviour in cyberspace has created a new domain for the propagation of crime, violence, misinformation and disruption.

And COVID-19 has had an especially pernicious impact on the world's women and girls.

Excellencies,

2020 brought us tragedy and peril.

2021 must be the year to change gear and put the world on track.

We need to move from death to health; from disaster to reconstruction; from despair to hope; from business as usual to transformation.

The Sustainable Development Goals are more important now than ever.

Now is the time to secure the well-being of people, economies, societies and our planet.

It is possible. So we must make it happen. Together.

Excellencies,

Our first priority for 2021 is to respond to COVID-19.

Vaccines are the first great moral test before us.

These must be seen as global public goods – people’s vaccines – available and affordable to all.

The COVAX facility urgently needs more resources to procure and deliver vaccines for low- and middle-income countries, and to continue vital research and development.

I thank the countries and organizations that are supporting COVAX, and the leadership of the World Health Organization.

I welcome new engagement by major developed countries.

But the world is falling short.

Vaccines are reaching a handful of countries quickly, while the poorest countries have almost none.

Science is succeeding – but solidarity is failing.

Governments have a responsibility to protect their populations, but COVID-19 cannot be beaten one country at a time.

If the virus is allowed to spread like wildfire in the Global South, it will inevitably mutate, it is mutating becoming more transmissible, more deadly and, eventually, more resistant to vaccines, ready to come back to hound the Global North.

Moreover, recent studies have found that vaccine hoarding could cost the global economy up to \$9.2 trillion – with almost half of that impact in the wealthiest countries themselves.

That figure is over 340 times more than the \$27 billion funding gap for the ACT-Accelerator.

There is only one victor in a world of vaccine haves and vaccine have-nots: the virus itself.

Today I am calling for six specific steps:

Prioritize healthcare workers and those most at risk everywhere.

Protect health systems from collapse in the poorest countries.

Ensure enough supply and fair distribution, including by having manufacturers prioritize supply to COVAX.

Share excess doses with the COVAX facility.

Make licenses widely available to scale up manufacturing.

Boost vaccine confidence.

Our “Verified” initiative is fighting the infodemic.

But there is no panacea in a pandemic.

We must continue to take the scientifically proven steps that reduce transmission.

Wearing masks. Physical distancing. Washing hands.

To defeat COVID-19 is possible.

We must make it happen. Together.

Excellencies,

Second, the world cannot heal from the virus if economies are on life support. An inclusive and sustainable recovery must start now.

We need massive investments in health systems everywhere.
Universal health coverage.

Mental health care.

Social protection.

Decent work.

And children safely back in school.

Developing countries have been drained of remittances, tourism revenues and earnings from commodities.

Wealthier countries are implementing recovery and stimulus plans worth trillions of dollars.

Yet the poorest countries have been able to spend only about 2 per cent of their small gross domestic product.

Recovery must be inclusive.

No country should be forced to choose between providing basic services and servicing their debts.

The High-Level events I convened last year with the Prime Ministers of Canada and Jamaica highlighted the urgent need for a quantum leap in financial support.

This includes:

An expansion of the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative.

Debt relief for all developing and middle-income countries that need it.

Increased resources for multilateral financial institutions, and a new allocation of Special Drawing Rights to the benefit of developing countries.

A voluntary reallocation of unused Special Drawing Rights.

Liquidity is crucial to prevent debt defaults.

Recovery must also be sustainable – embracing renewable energy, and green and resilient infrastructure.

Otherwise, we will lock in harmful practices for decades to come.

The 2030 Agenda points the way.

A sustainable and inclusive recovery is possible.

We must make it happen. Together.

Excellencies,

Our third priority must therefore be making peace with nature.

2021 is a critical year for climate and biodiversity.

Last month, I called on all Member States to declare a climate emergency in their countries.

Today, I call on the international community to reach five key milestones by COP26 in November.

First, let's keep building the global coalition to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

The coalition now represents 70 per cent of the world economy and 65 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions.

In the year ahead, let's ensure it covers at least 90 per cent of emissions.

G20 countries and main emitters must lead the way.

I call on every city, company and financial institution to adopt concrete roadmaps with clear intermediary milestones to get to carbon neutrality by 2050.

Key sectors such as shipping, aviation, industry and agriculture must do the same.

Second, Governments must submit Nationally Determined Contributions to cut global emissions by 45 per cent by 2030 compared with 2010 levels.

Third, we need to achieve a breakthrough on adaptation.

Adaptation cannot be the forgotten component of climate action.

Donors and multilateral development banks should increase the share of adaptation finance from 20 to at least 50 per cent by 2024.

Fourth, meet all finance commitments.

Developed countries must fulfil their pledge to mobilize \$100 billion annually for climate action in developing countries and it is not yet happening.

This should include full capitalization of the Green Climate Fund.

All development banks should align their portfolios with the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2024, and help mobilize private finance and investment through guarantees and partnerships.

This will shift billions of financial flows.

The UN-convened Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance and Global Investors for Sustainable Development Alliance are critical to this effort.

Fifth, adopt transformational policies.

It is time to:

Put a price on carbon.

Stop building new coal power plants.

Phase out coal in OECD countries by 2030, and everywhere else by 2040.

Phase out fossil fuel finance, starting with the overseas financing of coal.

End subsidies to fossil fuels.

Shift the tax burden from income to carbon, from taxpayers to polluters.

Make climate-related financial risk disclosures mandatory.

Integrate carbon neutrality into all economic and fiscal policies and decisions.

And finally, promote, fund and implement just transition plans.

Excellencies,

Particular solidarity is owed to the world's small island developing states.

Some face an existential threat – their territories could disappear within our lifetimes.

We must never allow any Member State to be forced to fold its flag because of a problem that is within our power to fix.

COP26 in November will be a moment of truth for climate action.

COP15 on biodiversity is a chance to halt the extinction crisis through a new post-2020 biodiversity framework.

Let's not forget that 75 per cent of new and emerging human infectious diseases are zoonotic.

This year's high-level dialogue on energy will propose solutions for the shift to renewables and the expansion of energy access.

As we prepare for the Ocean Conference in Portugal, the world must accelerate action to stop overfishing, drastically reduce pollution -- including plastics -- and promote the blue economy.

The Food Systems Summit and the global conference on sustainable transport can transform these vital sectors.

2021 will also be critical in advancing the New Urban Agenda and all cities are important.

To reconcile with nature is possible.

We must make it happen. Together.

Excellencies,

Our fourth priority is to tackle the pandemic of poverty and inequality.

More than 70 per cent of the world's people are living with rising wealth inequality.

But wealth is not the only measure.

People's chances in life depend on their gender, race, family and ethnic background, whether they have a disability, and other factors.

These injustices feed each other, cause people to lose trust in governments and institutions -- and resound down the generations.

The pandemic has made things worse.

We see it in the way Covid-19 has preyed on the vulnerable and marginalized.

This week's report by Oxfam found also that simply the increase in the wealth of the ten richest men, and they are men, during the crisis would be enough to prevent anyone from falling into poverty because of the virus, and to pay for COVID-19 vaccinations for all everywhere.

I continue to call for a New Social Contract within countries – to ensure that all people have prospects and protection.

Education and digital technology must be the two great enablers and equalizers.

Reforms to labour markets and forceful efforts against corruption, tax havens, money-laundering and illicit financial flows will also be critical.

Societies must transform the world of care.

Official Development Assistance remains a lifeline.

It is time to redress the wrongs of the past and address the systemic injustices of our time.

To keep our promise to leave no-one behind is possible.

We must make it happen. Together.

UNHCR

PRESS RELEASE

75,000 Afghan refugee families impacted by COVID-19 received emergency cash

ISLAMABAD, 29 January 2021: UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency completed the disbursement of emergency cash assistance for 75,000 vulnerable Afghan refugee families that have been the hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

More than 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees are hosted in Pakistan. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to work and earn a minimum livelihood, mainly as daily wage earners, has been severely affected.

In response, UNHCR launched an emergency cash programme in May 2020. The programme mirrored the Government of Pakistan's *Ehsaas* social protection programme under which vulnerable Pakistani families receive a one-off cash grant of Rs. 12,000. UNHCR's support helped vulnerable refugee families meet their critical needs, such as food, health, education, as well as rent and transportation.

UNHCR's cash assistance programme was established and rolled out in collaboration with the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON)/Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR), the Pakistan Post, some partner NGOs, and a network of refugee volunteers and community leaders. Using vulnerability criteria, this volunteer refugee network supported the process of identifying the neediest refugee families.

The UNHCR Representative in Pakistan, Ms. Noriko Yoshida, said, "Cash assistance to 75,000 refugee families is about leaving no one behind, as the COVID-19 pandemic does not discriminate."

"With the support of the Government of Pakistan and the international community, emergency cash assistance has made a difference in the lives of refugees during this very challenging time. The assistance has not only allowed

refugees to meet their immediate needs in dignity but has also been a gesture of the solidarity,” she added.

UNHCR’s emergency cash programme has supported a total of 450,000 Afghan refugees in Pakistan. One out of every three Afghan refugees has benefitted from this support.

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Photo caption:

An Afghan refugee receiving UNHCR emergency cash assistance at a Post Office in Islamabad. © UNHCR/A. Shahzad

The UNHCR Head of Sub-Office in Peshawar, Mr. Bernard Inkoom, witnessing cash distribution to vulnerable Afghan refugee families at a Post Office in Peshawar. © UNHCR/Z. Saleah