

Nigeria inundated by floods, as UN steps up disease prevention efforts

With over 826,000 people affected by heavy flooding affecting most of Nigeria, humanitarian agencies continue to step up efforts to provide life-saving assistance, especially basic medical care, which is essential to prevent disastrous epidemics.

Nigeria's two main rivers, the Niger and the Benue, burst their banks after heavy rain began falling in August, and the country has been experiencing large-scale floods.

The disaster is now affecting 12 out of 36 states according to the National Emergency Management Agency, with 176,300 people displaced, more than 150,000 hectares of farmland inundated, 17,800 houses washed away, and 321 roads and bridges destroyed.

As of Monday, the floods had claimed about 200 lives. A state of national disaster has been declared in the four most-affected states: Kogi, Niger, Anambra and Delta.

The United Nations and its partners are carrying out rapid assessments and scaling up support to the Government's emergency response. In particular, the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) has deployed experts to strengthen surveillance and early warning systems and is working to ensure that essential drugs are available in newly-created camps for displaced families.

"In addition to the immediate destructions and loss of lives, floods can severely affect the health of the affected population, even after the water levels have receded," said the head of WHO in Nigeria, Dr. Wondimagegnehu Alemu, in a [statement](#) released on Thursday.

Floods and their consequences – including a lack of drinkable water, shelter, and overflowing sanitation systems – can easily lead to the spread of communicable and water-borne diseases, such as cholera and malaria. In addition, access to healthcare and essential drugs can be difficult if health facilities are damaged.

"We can efficiently mitigate these risks if they are properly assessed and if disaster response measures are in place," Dr. Alemu explained.

To facilitate the mobilization of resources for the response to the flooding, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched an emergency appeal, seeking close to US\$5.5 million. The funds are to support 300,000 of the most vulnerable flood-affected people for the next nine months, with shelter and basic household items; protection and livelihoods assistance, including through cash transfers; health care provision; water and sanitation supplies.

The country's north-east is in the grip of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises due to conflict, and already suffering various cholera outbreaks in the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, making it crucial for humanitarian partners to effectively monitor and control the effects of the flooding in the rest of the country.

In the coming days, the UN humanitarian chief, Mark Lowcock, and the head of the UN Development Programme, Achim Steiner, will [visit the region](#), spending Friday and Saturday in Nigeria, and then moving on to neighbouring Chad.

[Dutch authorities brief UN chemical weapons watchdog on alleged Russian cyber-attack](#)

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefed the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)) on Thursday, over allegations that a cyber-attack was being plotted in April, against the headquarters of the OPCW, orchestrated by Russia.

The Ministry informed the OPCW chief that the attack was disrupted by the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service, which reportedly caught four alleged Russian agents who were in possession of specialist hacking equipment, near OPCW Headquarters in The Hague.

The briefing came as the United States and the United Kingdom, joined the Netherlands on Thursday in accusing Russian spies of involvement in a series of "cyber-plots" across the globe. Russia's Foreign Ministry is reported to have dismissed the allegations.

The OPCW is the implementing body for the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#), which aims to eliminate chemical weapons and their use. The Convention has proved to be the world's most successful disarmament treaty so far, eliminating an entire class of weapons of mass destruction.

On 4 September, the OPCW delivered its [report](#) on the "toxic chemical incident" in Salisbury, in the UK, produced at the request of the UK Government. A former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, were poisoned, and the toxin later resulted in the death of a third person.

Based on an investigation by an expert OPCW team, which collected bloods samples from the three individuals, as well as environmental samples from the site, the report showed that the toxic chemical was a nerve agent of high purity.

Russia has repeatedly denied any involvement in the Salisbury poisonings.

In a statement released on Thursday, the OPCW thanked the Dutch Government, which as host country, is responsible for ensure the protection of the Organisation's headquarters, for its actions and said that it takes the security of its information systems and networks, very seriously, noting a rise in cyber-related attacks since early 2018.

The Director-General said that OPCW Technical Services has undertaken measures to mitigate further attacks.

[UN-led tobacco control advocates denounce 'increasingly vicious' industry interference](#)

Tobacco giants are adopting new ways and "disguises" to push their products, noxious both for people and the environment, and interfere with government efforts to regulate the sale and use of tobacco, the head of the Secretariat of the [WHO FCTC](#), the United Nations-led tobacco control treaty, has told UN News.

The WHO FCTC, which stands for the [World Health Organization](#) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, is the only UN global health treaty that advocates for the control of tobacco production, sale and use, to reduce its harmful impacts.

The bad and the ugly

According to a [report](#) by the Convention Secretariat and the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)), over seven million people die every year due to tobacco use. In addition, more than a trillion US dollars are spent annually in tobacco-related medical expenses and lost productivity, while the environmental degradation and pollution resulting from its production cannot be overstated.

"As more and more people realize the levels of harm caused by tobacco products across the board, and how preventable it all actually is, we are slowly seeing more governments embrace tobacco control to save lives and the environment," said [Dr. Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva](#), the head of the tobacco-control Convention Secretariat.

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Silva, head of WHO FCTC.

“But the problem we’re facing is that the interference from tobacco giants in public health efforts is becoming increasingly vicious in that they are now using the tools and language of tobacco control advocates to push their dangerous agenda,” she warned. “It is still the same tobacco business interests, with the same intentions, namely profit, but they are using a misleading new disguise, so we have to be twice as vigilant.”

‘Seemingly harmless’ philanthropy

The UN-led treaty watchdog has been focusing on surveillance, documenting the ways in which the tobacco industry is re-branding and inserting itself in tobacco-control discussions and activities, including those related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order to influence decision-making.

Article 5.3 of the [Convention](#) legally requires that parties to the treaty ensure that their public health policies are protected “from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry”. The article is based on the idea that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health interests. In 2008, guidelines were developed for the effective implementation of Article 5.3, but the industry’s efforts to interfere continue too often to be successful.

For example, as recently as September 2017, the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC [denounced](#) the creation of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, funded solely by one of the world’s top tobacco companies with close to US\$ 1 billion pledged to sponsor studies on agriculture, labour and nicotine delivery products.

“This is a perfect example of a seemingly harmless philanthropy, which claims complete independence, promoting tobacco-industry-funded research and attempting to influence the public debate and common knowledge on the effects of tobacco on health and the environment,” said Ms. da Costa e Silva.

The Convention Secretariat stresses that many of the new products developed by the industry, marketed as “smoke-free” and “heat-no-burn”, create confusion among consumers, leading them to believe that they are safer to use, even though there is no independent research confirming it.

“With their right hand, they come up with these new – and still harmful – products, and with their left hand they find ways to support studies that present them as safer for people’s health, even though there is actually no scientific evidence to support such claims,” said Dr. da Costa e Silva.

The Secretariat [notes](#) that these tactics are being used by the industry on other fronts as well, such as issues like environmental degradation or child labour practices, to steer the public conversation in a direction that is more favourable to tobacco conglomerates and to prevent the adoption of effective tobacco control policies.

A young girl smoking. Photo: WHO/Jim Holmes.

“As tobacco giants become more creative, we must not forget: the tobacco industry is the problem here, so how could it ever be part of the solution? They have their own agenda,” Dr. da Costa e Silva insisted.

Some ‘encouraging decisions’ but an ‘alarmingly slow’ pace

To prevent further interference in public health policy design by tobacco conglomerates, the WHO FCTC is encouraging governments to put tougher measures in place, in line with Article 5.3 of the Convention.

Regarding the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, for example, in January 2018, Poland’s Ministry of Health alerted all medical schools in the country, informing them that Poland is a party to the tobacco-control Treaty, and urging them not to request or accept any funding from the tobacco-industry funded Foundation. The letter warned that in future legislative work, the Ministry of Health would not accept any research conducted in cooperation with, or funded by, the tobacco industry.

Viet Nam’s Ministry of Health issued a similar letter to all government ministries, and in the United States, 17 of the US’s top schools of public health announced they will not accept funding from or pursue work with the Foundation for the Smoke-Free World.

“There are encouraging decisions being made around the world but it is sadly moving at an alarmingly slow pace and we cannot afford to rest on our small victories,” noted the head of the Convention Secretariat. “The industry is always catching up and finding new ways to counter our efforts,” she warned.

To keep up, the FCTC Secretariat has set up seven “Knowledge Hubs” to monitor the progress made on the implementation of the treaty, including one in Bangkok, Thailand, dedicated to collecting and analyzing data to measure the progress toward making Article 5.3 a reality.

With ‘endless volley of assaults,’ aimed at refugees, UNHCR protection chief calls for ‘humane dialogue’

“Noise, chatter, shrillness, lack of civility, and harsh language,” surround the public debate over refugees, who face a “seemingly endless volley of assaults,” said the UN refugee agency’s ([UNHCR](#)) Assistant High Commissioner for Protection on Thursday.

[Volker Türk](#), made the comments in a [key address](#) on Thursday at the UNHCR's annual [Executive Committee Session](#) held in Geneva, where he called for a "more empathic and humane dialogue" focusing on human dignity, to counter fraught debates about refugees.

The world is "facing a watershed moment where two sets of values have emerged," he said. On the one hand, the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) has been developed, with 193 UN Member States joining in a constructive multilateral approach to the issue. Mr Türk said it showed what "can be achieved when we choose to rise above short-term interests to find a common way forward."

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[Volker Türk](#), UNHCR protection chief

In contrast, he said, some states are succumbing to populist pressures and shirking their responsibilities, at a time when war and persecution have uprooted [a record 68.5 million](#) children, women and men worldwide.

"We need to confront the xenophobia, racism, nativism, and bigotry, often driven by fear, anger, and anxieties within communities. These are often used to deflect responsibility as a pretext for demolishing institutions of liberal democracy. This ultimately has a corrosive effect on everyone."

Respect for dignity must be the antidote to dehumanization, said Mr Türk, underlining how hatred and violence had their origins in reducing individuals and groups to one or two characteristics, which "denigrates, and dehumanizes, challenging the inherent dignity of all."

On the subject of statelessness and nationality, Mr Türk said that stateless people have told him how they feel invisible, as if they have "fallen through the cracks and do not matter," and that "individuals are not objects to be governed by the powerful, but are subjects of law, endowed with dignity and entitled to a legal identity."

Factors fueling conflict and violence must be addressed as a matter of priority, he said, "including the arms trade, extraction industries, the acquisition of land for mining and other purposes, inequality, authoritarianism and environmental change and degradation."

Mr Türk expressed his surprise that some of the countries that have benefited most from international cooperation and trade are amongst the least willing to be part of international or regional frameworks on population movements, including refugees.

His comments echoed those made on Monday by Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in his [opening statement](#) to the Executive Committee Session.

Mr. Grandi contrasted the decision of countries near regions of conflict or other crises, to those further afield, often rich countries, which are

closing borders and “pushing people away,” adding “Today, when I engage with the leaders of countries neighbouring those in crisis, how am I to tell them to take more people, when some in richer countries are discussing how to close their doors?”

The UNHCR’s annual Executive Commission session ends on Friday.

Tunisia ‘at a turning point’ stresses UN rights expert

An independent UN human rights expert [welcomed](#) on Thursday the progress made towards democratic reform in Tunisia, since the 2011 revolution, and emphasized the importance of protecting freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

“Tunisia is at a turning point in its post-revolution history,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule. His statement followed a 10-day visit during which new legislation on the issue was being discussed.

“My meetings with various interlocutors allowed me to understand the stakes of the democratic transition,” he noted, welcoming the progress the country has achieved in terms of human rights protection over the past seven years, and the political will shown by the authorities to adopt new laws and establish institutions in line with international human rights standards.

However, he expressed deep concern over the current law establishing a National Registry for Enterprises, aimed at combating money laundering and terrorism.

Given that the bill creates requirements that would limit the capacity of associations to operate freely, and the important role played by them in the democratic transition, he called for Parliament to exempt associations from the new law. The call was ignored as the bill was adopted last Tuesday, reportedly without further debate.

In his statement, Mr. Voule urged the authorities to reconsider the approval of a law he considers “regressive” for Tunisian civil society.

He also expressed concerns about [reports of arbitrary arrests and disproportionate use of force](#) during the January 2018 protests against the finance law and austerity measures.

In addition, the expert cited delays in putting in place some of the institutions established by the 2014 constitution, such as the constitutional

court, the new court of auditors and an institution to safeguard human rights. "Without these institutions, the democratic transition, of which the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are essential pillars, cannot be ensured and might be undermined," he said.

"I truly hope that the democratic transition will be irreversible and lead to a fair and democratic society, in line with the slogan of the revolution," he added, "employment, freedom, dignity."

The conclusions and recommendations of the Special Rapporteur will be presented during the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in June of next year. Preliminary conclusions are available [here](#).