

Six months into DR Congo's deadliest Ebola outbreak, top UN official praises 'brave' response effort

"Brave" UN teams and partners leading the fight against deadly Ebola disease in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) along with Government authorities and peacekeepers there, have been key in helping protect communities, a top World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) official said on Friday, six months after the latest outbreak began.

Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO [Regional Director for Africa](#), was speaking to journalists in Geneva, where she said that challenges persist in overcoming virus hotspots in the north-east of the country.

"We have some 500 staff on the ground at the moment, the great majority from the DRC, and also from WHO offices across the African region. Some of these people have been fighting Ebola since the first 2018 outbreak began in the west of the DRC in May. These brave people and colleagues really do make us all proud."

To date, Ebola has claimed 461 lives in North Kivu and Ituri provinces, and 258 people have recovered from the illness, which attacks the immune system, causing internal-bleeding and major organ damage, if unchecked.

Dr. Moeti said that although there have been successes in bringing the disease under control in Beni and Mangina, the outbreak continues to affect a wide geographical area. There has also been a rise in the number of reported cases, including in Katwa health zone.

In addition to nine treatment centres, WHO has traced more than 45,000 people who have come into contact with suspected Ebola sufferers.

More than 69,000 people have been vaccinated in DRC to date, including 21,000 health-workers and 16,000 children.

More than 30 million people have been screened at the country's borders and vaccinations have also begun in neighbouring South Sudan and Uganda.

Insecurity remains one of the biggest obstacles stopping health-workers from reaching those at risk in the vast country, in an area where more than 100 armed groups operate.

"The situation in North Kivu is actually relatively calm compared to the pre-election period, and obviously calm is a relative term in North Kivu and Ituri, there's a constant threat of violence and attack from non-government forces," said Dr. Mike Ryan, Assistant Director-General for Emergencies at WHO.

“But I would echo Dr. Moeti’s thanks to our colleagues in [MONUSCO](#) (the UN’s stabilization mission in DRC) and the Force Intervention Brigade who continue to provide active defence for Beni, Butembo and surrounding areas.”

An additional obstacle to healthworkers is suspicion among communities, Dr. Ryan added, noting that attacks on workers “are an almost daily occurrence because of the nature of the work we do”.

Despite the challenges, major advances are being made in tackling DRC’s worst Ebola outbreak, helped by a new therapy now being tested on patients with their consent.

“This is the first time we’ve managed to deliver so many therapeutics with the higher standard of care into an integrated system for managing patients in a safe and dignified way,” he said.

“The results are encouraging in the sense anecdotally when you look at those results you are seeing on the face of it higher levels of survival”, he said, adding that “we have to be extremely careful, there are lots of biases there regarding the condition of the patient when they arrive...but we are certainly encouraged by the data we’re seeing.”

[Aid stepped up to Syria camp; new arrivals say terrorists blocked their escape](#)

Harrowing details continue to emerge of thousands of families who have risked their lives fleeing fighting in Syria’s last ISIL terrorist-held enclave, as UN humanitarians warned on Friday that children are still dying on their way to an overcrowded camp for the displaced, amid access problems and perishing cold.

In just the past week, more than 10,000 people have fled conflict in Hajin in eastern Deir-ez-Zor governorate, UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) spokesperson Andrej Mahecic told journalists in Geneva.

“Since fighting escalated in Hajin in early December, more than 23,000 people have fled to Al Hol (camp), effectively tripling its population,” he said. “Many more are expected.”

They travel at night with barely any belongings, often having to wade through the minefields and open fighting – *Andrej Mahecic, UNHCR*

Those fleeing Hajin described fierce fighting and said they were blocked from leaving by ISIL, or Da'esh extremists, who used to control large swathes of northern Iraq and Syria.

"Families fleeing the Hajin enclave and surrounding areas have also told us of a harrowing journey to safety," Mr Mahecic explained. "They travel at night with barely any belongings, often having to wade through the minefields and open fighting."

On reaching positions controlled by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the "hungry and cold" civilians – mainly women and children, according to UNHCR – "describe being herded into open trucks" and transported northwards to Al Hol camp.

Little or no assistance is given to them, Mr Mahecic noted, adding that since early December, "we have recorded 29 deaths among children and newborns".

More than two weeks ago, humanitarians asked the SDF to designate a site en route for Al Hol, where emergency assistance can be provided. This has yet to happen, the agency confirmed.

"We have approached the authorities who are effectively in control of the area where we need to work", Mr Mahecic said. "We have also appealed to those fighting and those with influence over those involved in the fighting to do their utmost to grant safety for the civilians fleeing and to allow humanitarian access in the areas where we need."

Many sleep in the open in freezing cold weather and walk or travel in open trucks from there – *Christian Lindmeier, WHO*

Christian Lindmeier, spokesperson for the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) described the life-threatening delays imposed on vulnerable families: "Fleeing civilians are stopped at Al Omar oilfields for days for screening and we need access to this area to assist the people there," he said. "Many sleep in the open in freezing cold weather and walk or travel in open trucks from there."

Amid a surge in arrivals to Al Hol camp and overcrowding, UNHCR and its partners have set up 24-hour response teams to identify the most vulnerable arrivals and provide assistance, especially to unaccompanied or separated children.

A number of other emergency measures have been put in place, with additional large tents to provide immediate shelter for new arrivals. The camp already has more than 4,500 tents, with another 3,600 ready to be erected.

Child-friendly spaces are also open, along with schools and communal kitchens to shelter new arrivals temporarily, UNHCR said.

The majority of those fleeing the fighting are Syrian residents of villages in south Deir-ez-Zor province, who have been caught up in the fighting as

ISIS retreated south. Mr. Mahecic noted that they are anxious about their confinement to Al Hol camp and the confiscation of their documents.

“Most hope to be allowed to join their relatives and friends in Deir-ez-Zor province and return to their homes as soon as the fighting is over,” he said.

‘Much more help is required’ WHO

WHO, which is ramping up its response to Al Hol camp, has already delivered thousands of medical treatments to support two mobile clinics and four health teams there.

The UN health agency has also supported vaccination campaigns, set up disease surveillance and training for volunteers to provide “psychological first aid and basic counselling”, WHO’s regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean [tweeted](#).

“A week ago, WHO airlifted more than 28 tonnes of medical supplies, equipment and vaccines to Al Hassakeh Governorate to respond to growing health needs in north-east Syria,” WHO’s Mr Lindmeier confirmed.

“This was the second shipment the organization has airlifted to Al Hassakeh this month,” he added. “It’s also worth mentioning that the first shipment this year was airlifted to the governorate on 8 January. It contained 20 tonnes of medical supplies sufficient to cover 110,000 medical treatments.”

Despite the airlifts, much more help is required. “Access does remain the key issue, just to remind everyone, and we need guaranteed approvals to access the camp and the roads leading to it,” Mr Lindmeier explained.

[Top envoy to Yemen praises ‘flexibility’ of chief negotiators as new UN mission chief is named](#)

The [UN Special Envoy for Yemen](#) said on Thursday that the main negotiators for the warring sides were continuing to show the “necessary flexibility and good faith” to move forward, despite delays in implementing [the agreement](#) marking the first steps towards a lasting peace deal, brokered in Sweden last December.

Martin Griffiths, has been talking with the Houthi rebel leadership in the capital Sana’a “to discuss the rapid and effective implementation of the Stockholm Agreement” the UN said in a briefing [note to correspondents](#) based in New York.

He also discussed the deployment of UN staff in support of cementing the fragile ceasefire, and withdrawal of Houthi and pro-Government coalition forces in and around the crucial port city of Hudaydah.

“The Special Envoy is encouraged by the responsiveness demonstrated by the leadership of Ansar Allah (the official name of the Houthi movement) in that regard. The Special Envoy also discussed the resumption of political consultations, stressing the importance of achieving substantial progress in implementing the Stockholm Agreement, as we move towards convening the next round of consultations.”

During his visit to the Saudi capital Riyadh this week, Mr. Griffiths said he had gained assurances from Yemeni President Adrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition of their continued commitment to respect and fully implement the agreement.

The envoy said leaders of both parties had “demonstrated the necessary flexibility and good faith regarding the timelines for implementation and the technical challenges that need to be resolved on the ground.

The parties also recognize the political and humanitarian importance of the full implementation of the Stockholm agreement. The Special Envoy reiterated the commitment of the United Nations to continue working with the parties to overcome any challenges in this regard.”



UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Michael Lollesgaard has been appointed the new head of the UN observer mission in Yemen. In this photo from 2015, he is briefing the Security Council in his former capacity as commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Mali.

Danish General appointed new head of UN Mission in Hudaydah

Also on Thursday, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) announced the

appointment of Danish Lieutenant General Michael Anker Løllesgaard, to succeed retired Major General Patrick Cammaert, of the Netherlands, as the new head of the UN Mission in support of the ceasefire and troop withdrawal agreement for Hudaydah, known as [UNMHA](#).

The mission was mandated by the UN Security Council in the wake of the Stockholm Agreement, for an initial period of six months, to lead and support the Redeployment Coordination Committee – which includes representatives from both sides to the conflict – monitor ceasefire compliance across the Governorate, and demilitarization of the key city, which is a vital conduit for nearly all aid and commercial goods into Yemen.

It will also oversee the withdrawal of fighting forces in the ports of Saleef and Ras Isa.

Responding to journalists' questions on Thursday in New York, over whether or not General Cammaert had resigned from his post in response to pressure, UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric denied the charge, reiterating that he was always on "a temporary assignment" heading up the advance mission, and team of UN observers.

"He will now stay, obviously, to do a handover, so he will leave very soon, in the early days of February, as soon as we can get his Danish replacement online," said the UN Spokeperson. "The most important thing for us is that there is continuity in the work of the RCC and the person who heads it."

Mr. Dujarric said that Lt. Gen. Løllesgaard "brings to this position 30 years of national and international military experience", having previously been appointed by the Organization as Force Commander of the UN Mission in Mali, [MINUSMA](#), from 2015-16.

'Leaders who sanction hate speech' encourage citizens to do likewise, UN communications chief tells Holocaust remembrance event

The Holocaust illustrates how easily "people can move from condoning brutality, to committing genocide" and shows that "leaders who sanction hate speech or make anti-Semitic or xenophobic slurs" are encouraging their own citizens "to do the same", the UN's head of Global Communications told leading members of the Jewish community at UN Headquarters in New York on Thursday.

Alison Smale led the briefing, which focused on the little-known record of Albanians during the Holocaust, who took in thousands of Jews who would otherwise have ended up in the Nazi death camps.

Under the theme: “Holocaust Remembrance: Demand and Defend your Human Rights”, it was one of the main events marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day throughout this week of reflection on the industrial-scale genocide of approximately six million European Jews during World War Two.

“While this occurred, there were individuals and countries that demonstrated tremendous courage to save Jews”, Ms. Smale told those attending, the multimedia event.

We all have a role to play in demanding and defending human rights
– *UN Global Communication chief Alison Smale*

“Rescuers made the brave choice to help in full knowledge of the grave consequences they, their families and community would face should they have been found helping Jewish people” she spelled out.

Recognizing Albania’s response as an example of moral courage, Ms. Smale said that it “embodies the principles of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

She said that the Albanian response also showed that everyone has a responsibility to defend human rights, identify strategies to protect those rights, and learn the consequences of inaction.

“Today, we witness populism, xenophobia, Neo-Nazism and hate groups on the rise, fueling anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred around the world”, she explained, stressing the role of civil society in documenting hate speech and hate crimes as “critical” to learn how to effectively address hatred, challenge its root causes and build resilient and just communities.

“Understanding the significance of historic actions taken to defend human rights – such as in Albania – is the first step towards encouraging such positive behavior among people today”, Ms. Smale underscored.

The event featured video clips from the film “The Albanian Code”, which shines a light on the role that the rugged and historically-rich Balkan country played to rescue Jews, interspersed with remarks and observations from Albania’s UN Ambassador Besiana Kadare; Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress; and Robert Singer, Chief Executive of the World Jewish Congress. Ms. Smale thanked all three for supporting the event and for “their commitment to Holocaust remembrance.”

Also taking part were Majlinda Myrto, Executive Director of the “Eye Contact Foundation”, whose family is honoured as “Righteous Among the Nations” for rescuing a Jewish family during the Holocaust, along with Anna Kohen, a child of Holocaust survivors who found a safe haven in Albania; and David Estrin,

Founder of the youth organization “Together We Remember”.

“Learning about the history of Albania’s response during the Holocaust is important because it demonstrates compassionate behavior” explained Ms. Smale.

“It reminds us that we are all responsible for each other. We all have a role to play in demanding and defending human rights,” concluded the head of UN Global Communications.

[Independent UN rights expert calls for compassion, not sanctions on Venezuela](#)

The crisis in Venezuela will not be solved by sanctions that “can lead to starvation”, a UN-appointed rights expert said on Thursday. Special Rapporteur [Idriss Jazairy](#), who reports to the [Human Rights Council](#), issued the warning against the background of widespread suffering in the South American country, linked to spiralling economic woes and deep political uncertainty.

An estimated three million people have left the oil-rich country since 2015, while supporters of self-appointed interim President Juan Guaidó, continue to demonstrate against the government of the incumbent, Nicolás Maduro, who was re-elected last May amidst allegations of electoral irregularities and a widespread opposition boycott.

“Sanctions which can lead to starvation and medical shortages are not the answer to the crisis in Venezuela,” Mr. Jazairy said in a statement, prompted by the imposition of sanctions on Venezuela’s national oil company by the United States.

Precipitating an economic and humanitarian crisis...is not a foundation for the peaceful settlement of disputes – UN independent rights expert, Idriss Jazairy

“I am especially concerned to hear reports that these sanctions are aimed at changing the government of Venezuela,” he added, while also noting his concern about reports of serious rights violations that include “the growing risk of violence and implicit threats of international violence”.

In a call for “compassion” for the people of Venezuela, Mr. Jazairy, who is UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures, insisted that “precipitating an economic and humanitarian crisis...is not a foundation for the peaceful settlement of disputes”.

Such “coercion” by outside powers “is in violation of all norms of international law”, the rights expert maintained, before calling on the international community to engage in constructive dialogue with Venezuela to find solutions to problems that include hyperinflation and the fall in oil prices.

In a recent [statement](#) issued by the office of [António Guterres](#), the UN Secretary-General urged parties to “lower tensions” in Venezuela and called for all relevant actors to commit to inclusive and credible political dialogue.

Concerned by reports of casualties during demonstrations and unrest in and around the capital, Caracas, the UN chief also called for a transparent and independent investigation of those incidents.

Last Saturday, the [UN Security Council](#) met to discuss the situation in the country, in which the UN’s top political official said that dialogue and cooperation were vital to [ending the crisis](#).

The meeting was requested late last week by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo following days of political unrest and deadly clashes in Venezuela between protesters and security forces.

The UN human rights office [OHCHR](#) reported on Tuesday, that at least 40 had been killed in the unrest, including 26 shot by pro-Government forces. More than 850 were detained following demonstrations in the past week, including 77 children.

“We must try to help bring about a political solution that will allow the country’s citizens to enjoy peace, prosperity and all their human rights,” [Rosemary DiCarlo](#), the UN Under Secretary-General of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, urged the 15-member body.

Nearly all 30 million Venezuelans are affected by hyperinflation and a collapse of real salaries, Ms. DiCarlo warned, citing shortages of food, medicine and basic supplies, along with a deterioration of health and education services and basic infrastructure such as water and electricity.

Those comments were echoed by Mr. Jazairy, who urged all countries to avoid applying sanctions unless approved by the Security Council, as required by the [UN Charter](#).