



## PRESS RELEASE

# United Nations Response to COVID-19 Outbreak in Lebanon

### Beirut, Lebanon

**Thursday, 9 April 2020 (United Nations)** – In recent weeks, Lebanon had to adapt to new restrictions imposed by the government, in an effort to curtail the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon. United Nations (UN) agencies in Lebanon are fully engaged in assisting Lebanon in responding to the unfolding health crisis. Joining hands with local partners, including governmental entities and civil society, the UN is working on preventing and containing the transmission of the virus and avoiding an overstretching of the health system, as well as responding to rising socio-economic challenges generated by the economic and financial crisis now exacerbated by the health emergency.

“Lebanon is going through an unprecedented emergency, requiring all of us to ramp up our actions to contain and stop the transmission of the virus”, said Acting UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Claudio Cordone. “The UN family in Lebanon has geared its efforts to support the government and is working with partners to respond to this pandemic. Today, more than ever, coordinated and decisive action is key to attenuate the impact of this crisis on all those throughout Lebanon who are hit the hardest, namely the poorest and the most vulnerable,” Cordone added.

At the health level, the UN helped scaling up Lebanese Ministry of Public Health’s readiness and response operations including the rapid identification, diagnosis and management of cases, identification and follow up of contacts when feasible, through effective coordination of national partners and stakeholders.

The UN also engaged with the Order of Nurses to train in Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and the proper use of personal protective equipment (PPEs) nurses working at hospital and Primary Health Care (PHC) level. Also, at the medical level, the UN provided substantive support to Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH), the main referral hospital for COVID-19 testing and case management. It provided needed testing kits and reagent since the announcement of the first case on 20 February 2020. Since then, RHUH has been running at least 200 tests per day. In a few days RHUH capacity will be expanded to around 450 tests per day. The RHUH has been the main hospital to receive PPEs sets sufficient for two months. The Intensive Care Unit capacity has expanded through the provision of ventilators and portable x-ray machines. The UN also delivered the first of a number of ventilators and portable x-ray to RHUH on 3 April 2020.

WHO Representative in Lebanon Dr. Iman Shankiti said, “We are working on all fronts to ensure better preparedness and response; awareness raising, risk communication, screening at points of entry, detection, testing at RHUH, case management in hospitals, and contact tracing.”

At the socio-economic level, the UN is working on increasing financial access to healthcare and support for households with COVID-19 cases, including the distribution of infection prevention kits and information and guidance and the removal of all co-payments for COVID-19-related testing and hospitalization costs for those without insurance cover regardless of nationality. The UN is also working on expanding direct income support for those impacted, particularly the poor, through cash transfers and the introduction of an emergency income support scheme to temporarily support incomes of vulnerable workers. Reducing other households' costs is also on the UN's agenda in terms of suspending payments of national and local taxes, in addition to lending support to businesses to promote economic activity.

In an effort to support local authorities and communities as frontline responders, the UN is discussing with over 20 Heads of Unions of Municipalities across Lebanon how they are coordinating their response in line with directives from the national level, identifying needs and proposing solutions.

The UN has itself taken all necessary precautionary measures, including strict quarantine, to prevent the spread of the infection among the peacekeeping mission in south Lebanon that includes more than 11,000 military and civilian peacekeepers, as well as among the host population.

The UN is also working to respond to the secondary effects of isolation and its economic impact, including reports of women's increased risk to domestic violence, their increased domestic and care burdens, and their possible longer-term increased marginalisation from the labour market.

According to UNICEF Representative in Lebanon Yukie Mokuo, "Children's lives and routines have been turned upside down in just a few short weeks. The most vulnerable families are affected not only by COVID-19 but by the economic situation. Moreover, stigma associated with flu symptoms could contribute to more difficulties in the lives of vulnerable families. This is ever the time for people to support each other in the communities, while equitable access to healthcare, information, water and sanitation services must be ensured".

With regard to refugees in Lebanon, the UN strengthened its overall preparedness, prevention and response measures in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, to account for the health and well-being of refugees and humanitarian personnel all over the country. To support refugees to follow the precautionary hygiene measures, the UN and its partners have engaged in a widespread and multi-media awareness-raising campaign since the beginning of the outbreak and started distributing soap and other sanitation materials to refugees in February. Awareness sessions were conducted in all informal settlements and collective shelters where refugees live in crowded conditions, and a second wave of sensitization and distribution of hygiene kits is being initiated. To date and based on available evidence, there are no confirmed COVID-19 cases among refugees in Lebanon except for one Palestine Refugee resident outside the camps. Nevertheless, the UN is working closely with the concerned Lebanese authorities and humanitarian organizations on contingency planning for isolation and containment in the event COVID-19 cases are identified among refugees, notably in overcrowded settings. In order to avoid an overstretching of the health system, UN agencies are also supporting the government with the expansion of existing capacities for hospitalization and intensive care, so that all COVID-19 infected persons in need of such treatment can receive it in a timely manner.

The UN has also urged collective action to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the education sector. It stepped up efforts to develop alternative solutions to school closure to ensure that learning never stops. The UN is supporting the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in

developing remote learning in the country, according to the strategy set up by the Ministry, and will be monitoring the progress of remote learning in Lebanon, identifying gaps, and providing technical support for the government in ensuring students' continued access to quality and inclusive education. The UN is implementing a Self-Learning Programme in its 65 schools for Palestine Refugees in Lebanon.

The UN system has launched several awareness campaigns for the general public on traditional and social media, as well as through direct individuals approaches. Several awareness raising information materials, including TV spots, posters and infographics have been prepared, in coordination with local partners, targeting all segments of society. Campaigns have been directed at sensitizing people on the need for proper handwashing through #SafeHands4Lebanon, on countering fake news and their negative impact on social cohesion and stability, on myths-busters. Campaigns have also sought to provide support and motivation for children during remote learning and address mental health, human rights including non-discrimination, and combating hate speech, xenophobia and stigma. The UN has also drawn attention on the importance of health screening in places of detention.