Beat: Health

HE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THAT IS NOT AS DEADLY IN AFRICA

BY LINH SCHROEDER TO THE IRC UK

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USPA NEWS - COVID did not spread out as quickly and was not as deadly in Africa as elsewhereOn 15 September, ICRC Africa deputy regional director Linh Schroeder gave evidence to the UK International Development Committee as part of a panel of humanitarians. Linh was joined by Selena Victor, Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy at Mercy Corps and Kate White, Medical Emergency Manager and COVID-19 medical technical lead for Médecins Sans Frontières, to answer MP's questions on how Coronavirus is impacting humanitarian operations.

WHAT ARE WE SEEING IN OUR AFRICA OPERATIONS ?----------
"COVID-19 did not spread out as quickly and was not as deadly in Africa as elsewhere," Linh noted. "That said, the number of cases continues to grow, and the virus is continuing to reach new areas. The threat is still real for Africa and Africans.
"It will have a devastating effect if it takes hold in areas already affected by conflict and armed violence, where those threats are already overlapping with existing health and economic crises.""The past months have just shown that COVID is another layer on top of devastation brought about by conflict."
AN ADDITIONAL LAYER OF MISERY----------Linh shared the example of Mozambique, where escalating violence has led to the forced displacement of thousands of people. Many have fled to Pemba, the regional capital, which is already a hotspot for COVID-19.ICRC has helped build the country's largest Coronavirus treatment centre in the town, which opened on 2 September 2020, but the situation remains fragile."People fleeing armed conflict in Mozambique are trading this life-threatening danger for the risk of COVID-19. The new treatment centre will help the community respond to the health crisis, but these families cannot return until the fighting moves away from civilian homes," said Raoul Bittel, the head of the ICRC's operations in Pemba, Mozambique.
THE WIDER IMPACT OF COVID-19----------
Linh went on to speak about the greater repercussions of the pandemic.
"What concerns ICRC most is the weak state of healthcare structures [in areas affected by conflict] which are not able to test or provide basic healthcare. "In Mali, 20% of healthcare facilities have been completely destroyed, most of which were in the north." "To give a comparison with the Ebola crisis, many more people have died from complications around childbirth or Malaria than the Ebola virus itself." This wider impact can already be seen in countries like Somalia, where we have seen a sharp decline in primary health care visits and childhood vaccinations during COVID-19.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE BEEN LEARNED ?----------
MPs were keen to understand what we could learn from African countries in terms of the way they have responded to COVID, and vice versa.Linh agreed that their experiences with Ebola have indeed shaped affected countries responses to the pandemic."With regards Ebola, certainly there a lot of lessons learned around preventative measures, the need to act very rapidly and communicate with the community."What we have seen with COVID is that African institutions, like the Africa CDC, have engaged and very early on with all their member states, as well as organisations like ICRC. We held webinars, for example, to address COVID issues in places of detention."
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The evidence put forward by Linh and the rest of the panel was welcomed by MPs. Chair, Sarah Champion told the panel, "What has resonated most with me, was talking about the countries that you're working in, was how any capacity that they had to fight against disasters has now been used up."There's an awful of lot information that you've given to us. We're looking to have our report on this out by the end of the month."Source : International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

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