



JANEZ LENARČIČ

MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Rue de la Loi, 200
B-1049 Brussels
Tel. +32 2295 04 00
Janez.LENARCIC@ec.europa.eu

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SENSITIVE*

Honourable Member of the European Parliament,

I would like to thank you for your letter of 12 May 2020 highlighting the continued humanitarian needs of the Sahrawi refugees in the face of COVID-19 pandemic.

I share your concern about this protracted crisis and the harsh living conditions in the camps.

My services are following closely the epidemiological situation in the Sahrawi camps.

Indeed, as you mention, preventive and containment measures to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus are in place in Tindouf and in the camps. The Sahrawi authorities imposed an obligatory quarantine to all persons entering the territory of the camps as early as 7 March 2020. In cooperation with the Sahrawi camps authorities, the Algerian authorities have sealed the camps with a sanitary cordon on 18 March 2020. In addition, the Algerian army has recently installed a military hospital fully appointed with COVID-19 medical equipment and devices.

As of 14 May 2020, the measures are proving to be effective as there are no cases of COVID-19 reported from within the Sahrawi camps, even if on 2 May 2020 fourteen confirmed cases emerged in Tindouf, the Algerian military town neighbouring the camps.

In terms of needs of the population, according to the information provided to the Commission, the World Food Programme (WFP) is carrying out a new assessment including the direct and indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food availability.

Ms Idoia Villanueva Ruiz, MEP
European Parliament
B-1047 Brussels

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Currently available data pointing to an increased level of undernutrition among women and children dates to 2019. The Commission reacted to the report on undernutrition by reinforcing its support to WFP with a nutrition programme for the amount of EUR 1.35 million in November 2019.

The WFP's general food distribution until May 2020 has provided the Sahrawi people with almost the full expected caloric intake¹. Moreover, WFP has added 19,000 rations for the period of the first three months of the year to cover the refugees considered as vulnerable to food insecurity in case of shocks².

On 19 April the United Nations agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations launched a specific COVID-19 appeal. Independently of this appeal the Commission had already decided to add close to EUR 500,000 for the reinforcement of the emergency rooms in the local hospitals and the installation of hand washing stations in the camps. Moreover, in mid-March 2020 the Commission had proactively approached its partners, both among the UN agencies and the INGOs working on projects funded by the Commission, to ensure that projects are adapted in order to prepare for the outbreak of COVID-19.

Beyond these measures, given the level of preparedness for a possible outbreak in the Sahrawi camps, the dramatic increase in needs worldwide and the limited resources at the Commission's disposal, the Commission is unable to respond to the appeal with additional resources at this stage.

The Commission is the biggest and most reliable donor in the Sahrawi camps. This demonstrates the European Union's commitment to this forgotten crisis at a time where humanitarian needs are on the rise worldwide. We will continue to advocate for a broadening of the donor base and timely contribution by other donors. Your help in this respect would be very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



Janez Lenarčič

c.c.: MEPs Malin Björk, Ernest Urtasún, Manu Pineda, Sira Rego, Tineke Strik, Javier Nart, Jytte Guteland, José Gusmão, Marisa Matías, Helmut Scholz, Dimitrios Papadimoulis, Andreas Schieder, Joachim Schuster, M^a. Eugenia Rodríguez Palop, Nikolaj Villumsen, Pernando Barrena, Sandra Pereira, João Ferreira, Miguel Urbán, Bettina Vollath, Klemen Grošelj

¹ January 2020 16,67 kg/16,67 kg; February 2020 17,17 kg/16,67 kg; March 2020 16,67 kg/16,67 kg; April 2020: 14,67 kg/ 16,67 kg.

² <https://fr.wfp.org/communiqués-de-presse/lunion-europeenne-soutient-laide-alimentaire-du-pam-dans-les-camps-de>