UN should cut costs before pursuing emergency coronavirus appeal

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The United Nations is seeking $255 million to help protect and mitigate coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreaks in refugee and displaced persons camps as part of a larger $2 billion appeal. While there is no organization better suited and cost-effective than the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to address the problem among a population that otherwise might fall through the cracks, the UN should trim or eliminate its more wasteful or unproductive programs before asking for new handouts at a time of global recession.

The UN could save money by folding what remains of the scandal- and corruption-plagued United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) into the purview of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. At a time of tight budgets, there is no reason why the UN should maintain two separate bureaucracies and duplicate bureaucracy if its goal is to serve those in most need. UNRWA’s 2020 budget appeal is for $1.4 billion. Folding its operations into UNHCR could save hundreds of millions of dollars.

Prior to approaching world leaders for this new hand out, UN Secretary General António Guterres should also explain the necessity at this time of crisis of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. That organization’s annual budget exceeds $250 million. The Human Rights Council can brag no material achievement; quite the opposite, its embrace of dictatorships makes a mockery of human rights advocacy and is corrosive to the UN’s broader reputation. Nor is it clear why, at a time of global crisis where most countries have closed borders and curtailed air travel, the UN must invest tens of millions of dollars in the World Tourism Organization, an agency whose purpose is both unnecessary to the broader UN mission and which can be readily replicated by national governments and the private sector.

The World Meteorological Organization has a budget exceeding $67 million. While a UN role in meteorology might have made sense when it was funded 70 years ago, today most countries have the resources to study weather on their own; indeed, there is little the World Meteorological Organization can do which individual member states cannot do. In effect, this is one more organization that exists mainly to dispense UN bureaucratic welfare rather than offer any bang for its buck. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) likewise does nothing which individual members-states cannot. With the UN asking for $2 billion in emergency supplementary assistance, donors would be right to ask Guterres why he does not first trim the fat.

That Guterres stuffed the emergency request with additional pork should also raise eyebrows. One program element for which the UN is asking funding is to “Prevent, anticipate and address risks of violence, discrimination, marginalization and xenophobia towards refugees, migrants, IDPs and people of concern by enhancing awareness and understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic at community level.” This sounds like Ivy League graduate seminar jargon. In effect, the UN wants to have an information campaign to tell people to be nice and not discriminate. Never has the organization been able to show that such campaigns are effective. Guterres might as well rename that “subsidize additional staff to sit in boardrooms and talk to each other.” It is unnecessary and an insult to real program needs.

The UN is important and, as with peacekeeping and refugee works, can do things which the State Department and Pentagon cannot. It should be supported. But these types of budget requests — absent any sense of fiscal responsibility within the UN’s own organization — are counterproductive and neither help UN credibility nor coronavirus victims.