

Update on UNHCR operations in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

As of September 2023, the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region hosted a total of 17 million forcibly displaced people, some 5 million of whom were refugees and asylum-seekers, and some 12 million were internally displaced persons. One out of every six refugees globally was hosted in the region.

In the last six months, UNHCR and partners responded to numerous humanitarian emergencies in the region, including as a result of conflict in the Sudan, drought in the Horn of Africa and the displacement of Somalis from Laascaanood. In addition, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania received thousands of people fleeing the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In April 2023, fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces broke out in the capital of the Sudan, and clashes rapidly spread throughout the country, generating significant population movements within the Sudan and across international borders. A regional refugee response plan for 2023 was issued the following month to coordinate the humanitarian response and mobilize support in light of increasing requirements.

The situation in the Sudan continued to deteriorate, despite attempts at ceasefire agreements and peace talks. As of August 2023, some 1 million refugees and returnees had fled the Sudan to neighbouring countries, with Chad and Egypt receiving the highest number of new arrivals, followed by South Sudan, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic. The estimated number of newly internally displaced persons exceeded 3.5 million by August 2023. Moreover, some 200,000 individuals who were refugees in the Sudan before the crisis sought safety in existing camps in the country, while others fled across borders. The relocation of new arrivals from the border areas of Chad, the Central African Republic and South Sudan was a priority, though logistically challenging.

The South Sudan situation remained the largest displacement crisis in Africa, with over 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees and asylum-seekers across the region. Hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese refugees returned from the Sudan to extremely difficult conditions in remote areas of the country. Due to heavy rains and floods, UNHCR was initially hindered in responding to the return movements, and the transit centres became severely overcrowded.

By the end of June 2023, over 2 million people had been internally displaced in Ethiopia and Somalia due to the continuing drought and insecurity. In addition, more than 254,000 people were forced across borders into drought-affected areas of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. In February 2023, UNHCR launched an emergency appeal for the regional drought response in the Horn of Africa and allocated additional resources to address the growing needs.

Somalia continued to grapple with internal displacement resulting from a combination of drought, flooding and armed conflict. There were more than 700,000 Somali refugees in neighbouring countries, as well as some 35,000 refugees and asylum-seekers hosted in Somalia. According to the UNHCR-led protection and return monitoring network, nearly 3 million people were displaced internally as of June 2023.

Meanwhile, armed conflict, which erupted in Laascaanood in February 2023, triggered the internal displacement of over 154,000 Somalis and a further 90,000 Somalis crossed into Ethiopia's Somali region. UNHCR worked closely with the Ethiopian authorities to respond to the emergency with an emphasis on resilience and sustainability through the early involvement of regional service providers, including in the areas of health, water and education.

The conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo continued to force people to flee the country, with some 42,000 new arrivals in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. In this context, the response capacity of asylum countries was hindered by inadequate financial resources to meet minimum protection and assistance standards.

In May 2023, UNHCR convened a high-level dialogue in Geneva, Switzerland with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda to discuss the voluntary repatriation of Congolese and Rwandan refugees. A follow-up technical meeting was held in Nairobi in June 2023, where the two governments agreed to review and revitalize practical modalities of the tripartite agreement of UNHCR, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda on voluntary repatriation that would ultimately allow refugees willing to return home to do so in safety and dignity.

Mixed movements

Increasing displacement due to conflict and extreme weather events in the region, leading to secondary movements, raised concern about the risks of human trafficking and smuggling along existing migration routes. A joint study with the Mixed Migration Centre to map the reasons behind population movements is ongoing in Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan, examining some of the existing data and information gaps.

Community engagement aimed at ensuring protection in the context of mixed movements in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan was supported in areas that were most affected. Awareness-raising regarding the risks involved and protection services available en route together with alternative complementary pathways, were provided and rapidly adapted in the context of the Sudan emergency.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region

Promoting a favourable protection environment

Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda kept their borders open to large numbers of arrivals during the first half of the year, with some 230,000 individuals registered as refugees or asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, in several countries in the region, restricted access to asylum procedures resulted in arbitrary detention and refoulement, as well as many people being left unregistered and unable to access assistance and vital services. Gaps in the capacity of national asylum systems in some countries led to delays in case processing, which may have contributed to onward movements. This also made efforts to promote inclusion in national systems, ensure access to basic rights and pursue durable solutions more challenging. The backlog of pending asylum applications increased from 197,500 to 270,000, mostly due to the reduced usage of prima facie processing and gaps in capacity. Going forward, UNHCR

will continue to support streamlined and adapted eligibility processing methodologies to help address such gaps.

In June 2023, the Government of Kenya co-hosted with UNHCR a high-level dialogue on the new approach to refugee management in the country, known as the *Shirika* plan. The plan envisages the transition from refugee camps to integrated settlements in which refugees and members of host communities live side-by-side and benefit from inclusion in strengthened national systems, including education, health care, civil registration and documentation. Both populations will also be supported in becoming self-reliant through a range of programmes.

Ensuring child protection, and preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse

Women and children constitute 78 per cent of the forcibly displaced population in the region and face particular protection challenges, including child labour, child marriage and the risk of female genital mutilation. Protection risk mitigation measures were undertaken, including impact analysis of the protection risks emanating from drought, situational protection advocacy briefs, and strengthened referral pathways for survivors of gender-based violence and for unaccompanied and separated children. Notable achievements included enhanced community engagement, leading to improved community-based feedback and response mechanisms and better accountability to affected populations. The ability of country operations to mitigate and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse was also strengthened through capacity-building for country-level focal points.

Promoting protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

By the end of June 2023, there were an estimated 12.2 million internally displaced persons in the region, though the actual number may be significantly higher. UNHCR focused on the provision of life-saving protection and assistance, including the provision of shelter. In line with its global cluster leadership roles and its revised policy on engagement in situations of internal displacement, UNHCR continued to lead or co-lead clusters on protection, camp coordination and camp management, and shelter and non-food items.

In Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and the Sudan, UNHCR advocated the inclusion of internally displaced persons in national systems, leveraged partnerships with development actors to secure financing for solutions and supported national frameworks to address internal displacement. These efforts all aligned with and were supportive of the Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. In northern Ethiopia, UNHCR assisted over 26,000 internally displaced persons who opted to return home this year.

In addition, UNHCR provided technical assistance to governments, such as Ethiopia and Somalia, which were making significant advances towards the domestication of the 2009 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention).

Providing cash and multisector assistance

In the first half of 2023, nearly 742,000 individuals (208,000 households) were provided with cash grants. Refugees comprised 91 per cent of recipients, the majority of whom were living in camps, followed by internally displaced persons (6 per cent), and returnees and host community members (1.5 per cent respectively). Of particular note was the diversification of cash assistance to meet a wide range of needs (energy, hygiene, shelter and voluntary repatriation), though food was reportedly still the top purchase (84 per cent). Approximately 44 per cent of cash transfers were conducted through bank transfers and mobile transactions.

UNHCR found that some 80 per cent of beneficiaries rated cash as their preferred modality of assistance, with 33 per cent expressing a preference for a combined approach (in-kind and cash). Most recipients (79 per cent) were able to access desired items in local markets.

Addressing food insecurity

The region experienced food insecurity and acute malnutrition due to conflict, outbreaks of disease, climate- and weather-related crises, economic shocks, high food prices and supply chain disruptions. Funding shortfalls resulted in food ration cuts ranging from 16 to 66 per cent, with further cuts projected. There was also an upward trend in new cases of severe acute malnutrition and moderate acute malnutrition, particularly in some refugee sites in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Partnerships to pursue medium- to longer-term approaches to food security were pursued.

Working towards the Global Refugee Forum 2023

A number of regional institutions and governments have developed regional and country roadmaps in the lead-up to the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. In June 2023, a high-level meeting on durable solutions for refugees in the East and Horn of Africa was hosted in Kampala by the Government of Uganda, a co-convenor of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, with the support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC). Ministers and representatives responsible for refugee affairs of IGAD and EAC countries adopted and signed a ministerial declaration of support. In April 2023, the IGAD Support Platform's roadmap to the Global Refugee Forum 2023 was launched in Djibouti.

Expanding development partnerships

UNHCR mobilized development resources to expand work on inclusion and self-reliance in the region. This included a joint project with the African Development Bank to help improve the investment climate in areas hosting refugees and internally displaced persons and collaboration with development actors, such as the World Bank, to gradually link services to national and local systems. UNHCR is also working with European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships to pursue solutions in protracted refugee situations in countries such as Kenya and Uganda, as well as to support development-oriented responses for Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia and South Sudan and returnees.

Pursuing durable solutions

In the first half of 2023, approximately 170,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin, mostly in a self-organized manner. Nearly 4,400 returns were facilitated to Burundi, bringing the total number of returns since 2017 to 212,000. Some 700 refugees were also assisted to return voluntarily to Rwanda. Prior to the conflict in the Sudan, more than 17,200 Sudanese refugees had repatriated on their own from Chad, Ethiopia and South Sudan. Self-organized refugee returns to South Sudan continued, including more than 200,000 from the Sudan following the outbreak of the conflict, with projections reaching up to 520,000 by the end of the year. These increased returns under adverse conditions have heightened the need for additional long-term investments in sustainable reintegration in areas of return.

In the first half of 2023, the cases of 15,500 individuals were submitted for resettlement, towards a revised 2023 target of approximately 24,000 cases, to 12 resettlement countries. With respect to complementary pathways, UNHCR facilitated family reunification and sponsorships by supporting applicants with exit procedures and the issuance or verification of required documentation.

Eradicating statelessness

In January 2023, the Kenyan Government recognized the Pemba community as native to Kenya and provided them with birth certificates, identity cards and passports. A recognition ceremony was held in June 2023, which will be followed by the distribution of Kenyan citizenship documents to about 7,000 individuals.

In June 2023, at the IGAD-East African Community Ministerial Conference in Uganda, the ministerial declaration that was signed at the event recognized the need to prevent statelessness caused by prolonged exile of refugees. In July 2023, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region of Africa and UNHCR held a conference on eradicating statelessness and supporting access to legal identity documentation in the region. The conference helped assess progress and challenges to implement statelessness pledges and shape new ones ahead of the Global Refugee Forum 2023. A joint study, “Refugees from generation to generation: Preventing statelessness by advancing durable solutions in the Great Lakes region”, was also launched at the conference. Experts at the event agreed to redouble efforts to address statelessness in the region.

Carrying out risk management

Risk management in the region remained complex, particularly in the context of ongoing emergencies. Resource constraints impacted the implementation of measures to reduce risks and the integration of risk management into everyday activities. Quality assurance of risk registers, quarterly reviews of the implementation of selected measures to mitigate risks, the identification of risk focal points and partner trainings as well as field missions have been undertaken.

C. Financial information

At the beginning of 2023, the comprehensive needs budget for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, which was approved by the Executive Committee in October 2022, amounted to \$2,021.2 million. The conflict in the Sudan resulted in a supplementary budget of \$268.7 million due to several incremental increases and budget reallocations in countries in the region. The situation in Laascaanood also saw the establishment of a supplementary budget of \$41.7 million.

In the region, the ongoing drought situation in the East and Horn of Africa, the influxes of people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and floods in Somalia and South Sudan are some of the additional crises requiring support. The overall funding requirements (\$2,161 million) for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes were funded at 30 per cent (\$638.1 million) as of 31 August 2023.