

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

A. Situational context

The East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region currently hosts 4.6 million refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority of whom are from South Sudan (2.25 million), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (708,000) and Somalia (522,000). Uganda continues to host the largest population of refugees in Africa (1.43 million), followed by Sudan (1.07 million), Ethiopia (769,000) and Kenya (496,000). There are also some 8.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, including in Somalia (2.65 million), Sudan (1.89 million), Ethiopia (1.74 million), South Sudan (1.47 million) and Burundi (137,000).

Between January and July 2020, nearly 71,000 people were displaced, with the majority seeking asylum in Uganda (28,000), Sudan (23,000) and Ethiopia (10,000). The onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in March 2020, however, saw arrival figures decline; just over 60,000 of the 71,000 new arrivals were recorded between January and March, and only 11,000 between April and July. The main countries of origin include South Sudan (22,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (18,000), Eritrea (10,000) and the Central African Republic (9,000).

Some 76,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin between January and July, including over 10,000 returns facilitated by UNHCR to Burundi, mostly from the United Republic of Tanzania, and 65,000 self-organized returns recorded in South Sudan. Some 600 spontaneous and facilitated returns were recorded in Somalia from Kenya, Yemen and other countries of the Horn of Africa.

Impact of COVID-19

While access to asylum was impeded by border closures, several countries temporarily re-opened their borders and/or put in place special measures for asylum-seekers. Movements also continued through unofficial border crossing points.

The limited availability of medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care providers and the lack of adequate testing facilities remained a challenge in most operations, alongside delays in the delivery of drugs and equipment due to disruptions in procurement. COVID-19 prevention measures have also increased pressure on the limited water supply in camps and settlements.

Movement restrictions have had an impact on the response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Reporting of SGBV has been limited by the inability of survivors to reach service providers. Strict lockdown measures in the region have also led to family separations. Most countries closed their schools, leaving some 1.1 million refugee students out of school.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has heavily affected refugees and IDPs across the region, particularly in urban areas. Job losses and business closures have left many persons of concern struggling to pay for rent, food and other essentials. Consequently, UNHCR has been receiving an increasing number of requests for financial assistance, including from previously self-reliant refugees asking to be transferred to refugee camps.

Situational updates

The South Sudanese refugee population remains the largest in the region, with many refugees living in extremely precarious conditions exacerbated by COVID-19. Despite border closures, lockdowns and movement restrictions, a steady flow of new South Sudanese refugees, originating from areas where fighting and insecurity have flared, continued to arrive in Ethiopia and Sudan. Some persons of concern moved back and forth across borders owing to a reduction in assistance in asylum countries and a lack of support for reintegration in returnee areas. In 2020, including during the pandemic, South Sudan also received over 1,700 refugees from the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan.

Despite progress in some areas, the overall security situation in Somalia remained unpredictable and high levels of displacement continued within and outside the country. Presidential and parliamentary elections have been delayed until August 2021, reportedly due to challenges stemming from political differences, security concerns and funding shortfalls. In addition to ongoing conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, Somalia has been contending with flooding caused by seasonal rains, and the worst infestation of desert locusts in 25 years. The flooding displaced more than 1 million Somalis in recent months, mostly inside the country.

New internal displacement and refugee movements from Burundi remained low despite heightened tensions during the May 2020 electoral period. Provision of assistance and services to Burundian refugees was constrained throughout the region due to lack of resources. For example, chronic food shortages and restrictions on livelihood activities left 25 per cent of the refugee population in the United Republic of Tanzania at risk of severe malnutrition.

Developments with other significant refugee populations

Since the end of 2019, a resurgence of conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has resulted in new displacement and triggered refugee outflows, mainly to Uganda and to a lesser extent to Burundi.

Sudan's transitional government has made a strong commitment towards peacebuilding and set an ambitious agenda for economic reforms, which will potentially contribute to finding solutions for displaced populations, including 2 million IDPs and 700,000 Sudanese refugees in the region.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

The Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Refugee Forum

The high-level segment on statelessness at the 70th session of the Executive Committee in October 2019 and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019 resulted in 514 pledges potentially relevant to countries in the region. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, some progress was made in implementation follow-up, including the development of country-level action plans in Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan and the United Republic of Tanzania, and a roadmap in Somalia.

At the regional level, UNHCR is working with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and members of the Nairobi process core group on the activation of the IGAD Support Platform. Launched at the GRF, the platform aims to mobilize political, technical and financial support for pledges to address education, health, and livelihoods-related needs in refugee-hosting areas of the IGAD region.

Collaboration with the International Finance Cooperation (IFC) to promote private sector engagement in refugee-hosting areas is ongoing in several countries, including Ethiopia and Sudan as well as Kenya where the IFC's 5-year, \$25 million flagship Kakuma-Kalobeyei Challenge Fund was launched virtually in June.

Durable solutions

Voluntary repatriation

Due to COVID-19, facilitated refugee returns were put on hold in most countries. Facilitated returns from the United Republic of Tanzania to Burundi resumed in July 2020 following a hiatus during the electoral period. Assisted returns of Burundians from Rwanda were initiated in August 2020 following requests from refugees for support to return. UNHCR does not promote returns to Burundi but facilitates the return of those refugees who have made an informed voluntary choice to go back. UNHCR continued to monitor and identify areas where internal improvements could create conditions conducive for promoted returns.

UNHCR is not promoting or facilitating voluntary repatriation to South Sudan due to the prevailing security situation there but continues to monitor return conditions at border points and in return areas where community-based projects are contributing to peacebuilding.

UNHCR has facilitated the return of some Sudanese refugees from Chad to Sudan. Some returns of Somali refugees were facilitated by UNHCR from Kenya to Somalia, where the Office also recorded several hundred spontaneous returns from Yemen since the start of 2020.

Resettlement and complementary pathways

Resettlement identification and processing continued, albeit at a reduced pace. The emergency transit mechanism (ETM) in Rwanda has been significantly affected by the pandemic. Several country operations introduced remote interviewing modalities to ensure continuity of resettlement submissions. Receiving States demonstrated flexibility in extending submission deadlines and 41 per cent of the regional quota for resettlement was met by July 2020. While resettlement departures were suspended for several months, they are resuming as movement restrictions are lifted.

The resettlement needs of specific refugee populations and the challenges related to resettlement processing during COVID-19 in Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania were highlighted at the virtual Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement. A mapping exercise to identify opportunities and challenges related to the expansion of complementary pathways in the region is ongoing.

C. Promoting a favourable protection environment

Access to asylum, registration, refugee status determination (RSD) and documentation was hampered by COVID-19 mitigation measures. Office premises and procedures were adapted to permit contact with persons of concern and remote case-processing, where appropriate. Some protection services were delivered through remote options, which are increasingly reliant on community-based structures.

UNHCR has consistently advocated for special measures to be put in place to allow asylum-seekers to be admitted to territory, and arriving refugees were registered in Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

After a pause due to COVID-19 restrictions, registration activities have resumed in all countries, with prevention measures in place. In countries where issuance of documentation had been suspended or limited, UNHCR worked with the authorities to ensure recognition of documentation and access to services for those refugees whose asylum documentation had expired. State-led RSD activities are gradually recommencing in the region and UNHCR conducted some RSD interviews under its mandate in Burundi, as well as in Rwanda's ETM.

During movement restrictions, refugee and IDP community-based networks across the region have played a significant role in the COVID-19 response. These networks have helped UNHCR maintain proximity with persons of concern and provide accurate information on risks. In some operations, refugee and IDP community

networks were assisted with mobile phones, data bundles, radios, solar chargers and bicycles to support their vital communication role.

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

UNHCR and partners have worked to strengthen community-based structures to monitor child protection needs and incidents of SGBV and deliver assistance in the context of the reduced presence of humanitarian personnel. Remote training, capacity-building and coaching sessions have been organized and helplines have been reinforced with additional staff trained to provide remote counseling for SGBV survivors and their referral to appropriate services, especially in urban areas where reaching out to survivors had been challenging due to movement restrictions. Country operations have set up foster care arrangements and other support mechanisms for children temporarily separated from their usual caregivers.

With concerns that the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse could rise in the context of COVID-19-related measures, UNHCR and partners have increased sensitization activities and made sure that channels to report allegations of exploitation and abuse were widely publicized.

IDP response

In the four major IDP response operations in the region, UNHCR has adapted different protection and solutions strategies based on local conditions and the impact of COVID-19. In Ethiopia, the Durable Solutions Initiative (DSI) launched in December 2019 by the Government, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations and donors provides an operational framework for communities affected by internal displacement. UNHCR is co-chairing the Oromia region's durable solutions working group, while also engaging in similar forums in the Somali and Gambella regions. With the onset of COVID-19, UNHCR stepped up its leadership efforts in partnership with the health, water, sanitation and hygiene, and shelter clusters.

In Somalia, UNHCR's response focused on protection monitoring, community engagement and risk communication, as well as the provision of health and hygiene supplies. Where possible settlements were decongested and shelter and household supplies were distributed to those affected by flooding. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR and the protection cluster have been urging federal and local authorities to institute a moratorium on the eviction of IDPs from their dwellings, which is a key protection concern.

In South Sudan, UNHCR continued to engage in protection profiling and analysis to support protection-centred returns, peacebuilding, reconciliation and social cohesion. Through area-based "solutions working groups", UNHCR and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan have enabled some 1,700 IDPs to voluntarily return to their areas of origin in 2020, bringing the total number of returns since 2018 to 13,400.

In Sudan, IDP returns have been affected by movement restrictions related to COVID-19 and ongoing insecurity in some locations, while conflict in Darfur has caused additional displacement. UNHCR's response has been characterized by supporting community mobilization, peacebuilding and social cohesion, youth programming, protection monitoring, community support projects, and coordination leadership in the protection sector. In May 2020, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) assumed co-leadership of a new task force to ensure multisectoral coordination in IDP camps and mitigate the effects of the pandemic. UNHCR also increased protection monitoring in the context of the drawdown of the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur.

Mixed movements

As persons of concern face additional economic hardship, attempts at onward movement using riskier routes, due to border closures and other restrictions, may increase. Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in transit when COVID-19 broke out remain stranded and, in some cases, detained.

Statelessness

Progress on pledges made during the high-level segment on statelessness during the 10th session of the Executive Committee in October 2019 was limited in the first half of 2020 as governments in the region prioritized their response to COVID-19. Despite these challenges, the Government of Rwanda delivered on its pledges to combat statelessness, including by constituting a national action plan taskforce and drafting legislation. The United Republic of Tanzania agreed to issue birth certificates to refugee children born on its territory in accordance with the principle of universal birth registration, which is crucial in the prevention of statelessness.

COVID-19 response

Information campaigns promoting handwashing and social distancing were put in place throughout the region targeting all populations in camps and settlements. Emphasis on prevention required efforts to increase water supply and the provision of soap. Over 1 million face masks have been distributed. UNHCR continues to establish health facilities for isolation and treatment and is providing PPE and testing kits.

With schools closed in most countries, various distance learning methods were put in place. However, reaching large numbers of students was a challenge because of the limited information and communications technology infrastructure and connectivity available for online learning. A lack of access to televisions and radios for broadcasted lessons was also a hindrance for some refugees and IDPs.

To mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic on refugees in urban areas, cash-based interventions were scaled up across the region, with some 180,000 individuals receiving specific cash assistance in the context of COVID-19. UNHCR has been working with host governments and donors to explore how refugees can be included in new or expanded emergency safety net programmes.

D. Risk management

Consistent engagement by the risk management team with country operations and quarterly regional meetings ensured ongoing dialogue and support to identify and mitigate potential COVID-19-related risks, including those related to the impact on persons of concern, duty of care to staff, business continuity and the operational response.

Online training sessions on risk management and internal controls were facilitated for several country operations, including Eritrea and South Sudan, and upcoming sessions are planned for Burundi and Djibouti. In addition, the regional bureau is supporting the South Sudan and Somalia country operations to develop fraud prevention strategies and action plans.

E. Financial information

As at the end of August 2020, the comprehensive needs budget for the region in 2020, amounting to \$1.902 billion, was only 37 per cent funded. The impact of COVID-19 on displaced populations and host communities, together with floods and droughts, created additional funding needs. In a region that hosts the largest number of refugees on the African continent, and where more than 80 per cent of refugees still reside in camps and settlements, more support is needed to bring assistance and services up to standard while investing in inclusion and solutions up front.