

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

A. Situational overview

By mid-2021, countries in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted some 4.74 million refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority from South Sudan (2.2 million), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (731,000) and Somalia (551,000). Uganda continues to host the largest population of refugees in Africa (1.5 million), followed by Sudan (1.1 million), Ethiopia (785,000) and Kenya (520,000). The region is home to around 60 per cent of the refugees and asylum-seekers on the continent.

In the first half of 2021, nearly 82,000 people were displaced across borders, with the majority seeking-asylum in Sudan (47,000), Uganda (14,000) and Ethiopia (9,000). While a notable decrease in the number of new arrivals was observed in 2020 compared to earlier years, due to the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and associated containment measures, an increase in movements in the region has been noted in 2021.

In addition, there are some 9.99 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, notably in Somalia (2.97 million), Ethiopia (2.74 million), Sudan (2.55 million), South Sudan (1.62 million) and Burundi (114,000).

Situational updates

In Ethiopia, the dynamics of the Tigray conflict remain complex and fluid, hindering humanitarian access to the affected populations and hampering effective delivery of protection and assistance. In addition to some 2.1 million IDPs in Tigray, an estimated 250,000 people have been displaced in the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions with the spread of the conflict in recent months. Active fighting, intermittent access and difficulty in positioning supplies have impacted tens of thousands of vulnerable Eritrean refugees in Tigray and more recently in Afar, and complicated plans to relocate refugees to safer areas. The Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia and Somali regions of Ethiopia have also reported new internal displacement due to inter-communal violence. Furthermore, the humanitarian response for some 56,000 Ethiopian refugees in eastern Sudan has been affected by extreme weather events, logistical challenges and security concerns along the border, with the possibility of an additional refugee influx also requiring preparedness efforts.

With South Sudan marking 10 years of independence, it remains the largest displacement crisis in Africa. Outbreaks of conflict, annual flooding as a result of climate change and food insecurity continue to mar achievements on the humanitarian front, requiring agencies to maintain contingency stocks and rapid response capacity. Although violence continues to occur and insecurity remains high at the sub-national level, pockets of security allow some displaced families to contemplate return. While UNHCR does not promote or facilitate repatriation at this time, some 400,000 South Sudanese refugees have returned on their own accord since 2017, with IDPs also increasingly returning to secure areas. Returns are often

taking place to areas of South Sudan where access to basic services is extremely limited. There are also many movements across borders triggered by hardships in asylum countries, notably drastic reductions in food rations.

Sudan faces multiple challenges that are impacting the displaced as well as the local population, such as inflation, high levels of food insecurity and seasonal flooding. The country hosts about 1.1 million refugees and 2.55 million IDPs, many of whom are caught in situations of protracted displacement that require lasting solutions to bolster self-reliance. The ongoing influx from Ethiopian refugees, new arrivals from South Sudan and conflict and displacement in Darfur since the start of the year have created additional humanitarian needs.

Somalia's protracted humanitarian crisis continues to be characterized by ongoing conflict, climate-related shocks including drought, floods, cyclones and desert locusts, outbreaks of communicable diseases and weak social protection mechanisms, resulting in ongoing displacement. Recurrent uncertainties surrounding the electoral process, as well as terrorist attacks, have exacerbated the fragility of the country. These conditions adversely impact the humanitarian situation, undermine abilities of humanitarian actors to deliver protection and assistance services, and may deter large-scale return of displaced populations.

Discussions in Kenya around camp closures and solutions for protracted refugee populations have prompted regional coordination and planning with government, humanitarian and development stakeholders in South Sudan and Somalia on efforts needed to create conditions conducive to voluntary return and sustainable reintegration.

The relative stabilization of the situation in Burundi has contributed to an increase in voluntary return. By the end of August 2021, some 175,000 Burundian refugees had returned creating pressure on the country's limited reception capacity. While UNHCR continues to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Burundi refugees who willingly chose to return, it is not actively promoting returns. A Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (JRRRP) is in place but remains dramatically underfunded.

Mixed movements

The outflow of refugees from Ethiopia to Sudan has created concerns about the risks of human trafficking along existing migration routes. An exercise to map protection services available for victims of trafficking and other vulnerable people on the move towards North Africa, Europe and the Gulf was carried out in Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan. Furthermore, a learning programme was rolled out to UNHCR personnel in the region, to build a broader and better understanding of mixed movement in the region.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to adversely affect the livelihoods, health and wellbeing of refugees and IDPs in the region. High-frequency phone surveys conducted with the World Bank and national statistics offices in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda on the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 indicate income loss, including from remittances, and reduced access to work, coupled with an increase in food prices. This has resulted in less-than-optimal coping mechanisms such as reducing food consumption, depleting savings, and selling assets.

As of August 2021, there had been over 7,200 confirmed COVID-19 cases among refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR in the region. New waves of infections have impacted most of the countries in the region and congestion of health facilities, delays in procuring tests and lack of food supply for refugees admitted to COVID-19 facilities are among the challenges faced. Increases in gender-based violence, child labour and exploitation and other harmful coping mechanisms, in particular among the most vulnerable groups, persist.

While refugees have been included in vaccination plans in most countries, vaccine shortages have hampered the roll out effort. At the end of August 2021, some 13,700 refugees in the region had received at least one vaccine dose, with only 2,850 refugees (in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda) being fully vaccinated.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Promoting a favourable protection environment

Asylum procedures gradually resumed in several States in 2021 but were periodically placed ‘on hold’ due to new waves of COVID-19. Despite the overall easing of movement restrictions, some asylum-seekers continued to face constraints in formally accessing some States’ territories, and border monitoring activities continued to be hampered in several locations. Access to asylum procedures was also barred for specific groups in some instances, notably lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning asylum applicants.

Discussions about moving from the use of *prima facie* refugee status to individualized refugee status determination for key caseloads in the region, including South Sudanese refugees, has the potential to create new and increase existing backlogs of asylum applications.

Despite verbal and written demarches by UNHCR, cases of refoulement to Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo continued to occur. Reports of the return of 10,000 Mozambicans denied admission to seek asylum led to a joint communique in July by UNHCR, the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights and the Special Rapporteur on refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Africa.

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

UNHCR continues to emphasize the protection of women and girls, as well as men and boys, from gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse, including a focus on mental health and psychosocial support in the context of the pandemic.

As in many emergencies, gender-based violence has been a distinctive feature of the conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia. In accessible areas, UNHCR and partners have established protection desks with dedicated social workers supporting outreach. Protection teams are identifying people at heightened risk and referring them to specialized services, including counselling and health services for survivors. In Sudan, UNHCR is scaling up measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse, including safety audits at refugee locations and capacity building trainings for partners and staff.

In June, a draft tool for the inclusion of children in national child protection systems was released. This tool will be used to review the level of access to refugee protection procedures and basic services for refugee children, while reviewing system capacity to protect refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Response to internal displacement

In Burundi, an IDP profiling exercise is ongoing under the leadership of UNHCR and partners with the support of the Joint IDP Profiling Service. In Ethiopia, UNHCR and partners reached over 365,000 IDPs by June with protection and assistance activities – about half of them in the Tigray region where UNHCR undertook a significant scale up of its personnel and programme capacity. In Somalia, the Office continues to lead the protection and returns monitoring network, tracking displacement and rights violations among IDPs. It is increasing efforts for the greater use of monitoring data in shaping the response to internal displacement. In South Sudan, in addition to meeting emergency needs of internally displaced populations, including by introducing more cash-based assistance, UNHCR is

seeking to bring development approaches and investments to support solutions through an integrated area-based approach. In Sudan, the Office is responding to new displacements in Darfur, including emphasis on protection related information management and analysis, capitalizing on established community-based networks to identify and analyse localized conflict developments.

As part of the strengthening of coordination and operational responses in IDP operations in the region, UNHCR is working to develop and implement tri-cluster coordination of the protection, shelter and camp coordination and camp management clusters, where feasible.

Cash/multi-sector assistance

In the first half of the year some 745,000 persons of concern have benefitted from cash assistance in the region. Interventions have focused on needs related to energy, shelter, hygiene, livelihoods, education, protection and repatriation. Cash transfers have been institutionalized via digital payments: bank transfer represents almost 74 per cent of all cash transfers in 2021. Some 86.5 per cent of households have reported cash as their preferred modality, or a combination of mixed assistance (cash and in-kind). A mapping of the inclusion of persons of concern to UNHCR in national financial and digital systems is underway.

Food security

Funding shortfalls have resulted in major reductions of food aid for over 3.3 million refugees (or 72 per cent of refugees in the region) in Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Rwanda, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania. This remains a critical issue in the region as refugees are largely dependent on food assistance to meet their basic food and nutritional needs. Many have resorted to a range of coping mechanisms with negative protection impacts, such as child marriage.

Global Compact on Refugees/Global Refugee Forum

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, countries in the region and a range of other stakeholders have continued to make progress in the implementation of pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF), such as Somalia's launch of a cross-government, four-year durable solutions strategy and national action plan. In the global GRF digital tracking database, as of July 2021, progress was reported on 74 pledges made by entities from the region – 16 are in their planning stages, 56 are being implemented and two reported as fulfilled.

In preparation for the High-Level Officials Meeting in December 2021, UNHCR and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) organized regional consultations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in June. Organizations showcased progress made on GRF pledge implementation and discussed challenges and needs for further support. National NGOs and refugee-led organizations were well represented, and participants highlighted the need for longer term multi-year funding commitments from donors and the allocation of resources to development centred projects, despite ongoing multiple humanitarian crisis in the region. The consultations featured a side event of the Poverty Alleviation Coalition, where NGO partners reviewed progress made in reaching the joint regional pledge of lifting 48,000 households out of poverty by the next GRF in 2023.

The solutions initiative for Sudan and South Sudan, launched at the end of 2020 as a flagship activity of the support platform of the Intergovernmental Authority of Development (IGAD), focused on the development and validation of national strategies and action plans to find solutions to the displacement crises affecting both countries. Consultative processes contribute to identifying solutions opportunities and areas of focus like integrated area-based programs for refugees, IDPs, returnees and hosting communities, and support to GRF policy pledges made by both

governments. The solutions initiative aims to galvanize a stronger collective response to create enabling conditions for solutions by addressing humanitarian, development and peace-related aspects, and helps to operationalize those of the two countries' respective peace agreements that relate to ending forced displacement and finding solutions. A regional strategy and action plan are currently under preparation for adoption at an IGAD Heads of State Summit in early 2022.

Under the auspices of the IGAD support platform and the Nairobi process, IGAD Member States met in April 2021 to take stock of progress made vis-à-vis GRF pledges on livelihoods at the first regional technical experts' meeting on [the Kampala Declaration on jobs, livelihood, and self-reliance for refugees, returnees, and host communities](#).

Most of the IGAD Member States have or are in the process of securing financing from the World Bank, including through the IDA-18 refugee sub-window and IDA-19 window for host communities and refugees to improve access to basic social services, expand economic opportunities, and enhance environmental management.

Durable solutions

By 31 July, more than 103,000 refugees had repatriated to their countries of origin in the region in 2021. This included nearly 49,000 Burundians assisted to return from five countries of asylum, with the majority from Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Nearly 52,000 South Sudanese returned on their own from Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda. Over 1,500 Somalis returned, assisted from Eritrea and Kenya, and spontaneously from Yemen. Some 500 Ethiopians returned from Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and nearly 1,000 Rwandans returned to Rwanda, the majority from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Logistical constraints to organizing returns in the context of COVID-19 remain a challenge. Support for long-term reintegration activities in countries of origin continues to be limited, despite ongoing efforts to engage development actors.

Following the Government of Kenya's communicated intention to close refugee camps, UNHCR and government counterparts developed a joint roadmap for protection and solutions for the different refugee groups residing in camps in Kenya. A verification and intentions survey is ongoing in the Dadaab refugee camps and planned for refugees living near Kakuma to inform planning for various solutions options.

Intention surveys are also being developed in the context of the Sudan and South Sudan solutions initiative, to be conducted with refugees and IDPs in Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic's continuing impact on resettlement processing, the region is on track to meet the allocated quota of some 22,300 individuals in 2021. Resettlement countries have showed flexibility by conducting remote resettlement missions and adjusting deadlines. A regional complementary pathways strategy has been developed, which encompasses a range of activities related to educational and labour mobility pathways.

Statelessness

Progress was made in fulfilling the commitments made at the high-level segment on statelessness of the Executive Committee in 2019 in recent months, including in Kenya where 1,642 certificates of registration for citizenship were issued to individuals of Shona descent. Rwanda gazetted a new nationality law providing facilitated pathways for stateless persons to access Rwandan nationality. The Federal Government of Somalia adopted a national action plan to eradicate statelessness, paving the way towards accession to the statelessness conventions and legal reform.

The International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (IGCLR) with support of UNHCR initiated a study on risks of statelessness and prospects for durable solutions

among selected protracted refugee populations in the Great Lakes region. This will also inform the development of an ICGLR comprehensive durable solutions strategy.

Risk management

Operations continue to update their online risk register tools to reflect emerging risks and to implement agreed risk treatments. Bureau support to operations included the delivery of risk management training, help with risk assessments, formulation of fraud and corruption prevention strategies and action plans, and the establishment of Assurance Committees. Support and oversight missions have been resumed to selected operations. Risk management and compliance support is ongoing for the Ethiopia and Sudan operations in the context of the Tigray response. Risk assessment has also been conducted for the Kenya protection and solutions roadmap identifying key risks, mitigation measures and resources required.

C. Financial information

At the beginning of the year, the comprehensive needs budget for the EHAGL region, approved by the Executive Committee in October 2020, amounted to \$1.7 billion. As of 31 August, it had increased to \$1.9 billion due to emergency preparedness and response activities in Ethiopia and Sudan requiring additional funds amounting to \$106.6 million and COVID-19 related needs amounting to \$93.4 million. The overall regional funding requirements were funded at 45 per cent as of 31 August.
