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Update on Voluntary Repatriation

Summary

This paper provides an update on efforts to secure solutions for refugees through voluntary repatriation since the last update on Solutions was presented to the 75th meeting of the Standing Committee (EC/70/SC/CRP.12) in 2019. It discusses the challenges pertaining to voluntary repatriation and reintegration efforts, as well as the momentum and opportunities created by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in advancing solutions for forcibly displaced people. This paper should be read in conjunction with the Note on International Protection (EC/71/SC/CRP.9).

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I. Introduction

1. At the end of 2019, nearly 317,200 refugees repatriated voluntarily, a decrease of 46 per cent compared to 2018. While voluntary repatriation remains the solution preferred by many refugees, fewer of them have been able to exercise their right to return in conditions of safety and dignity since 2005, when 15 per cent of the global refugee population found a solution in voluntarily repatriation as compared to 1.6 per cent in 2019. At the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), held in December 2019, there were 108 solutions-related pledges, 27 per cent referred to voluntary repatriation and 73 per cent to local integration and other local solutions. In the absence of viable prospects for return, some hosting countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia have been exploring measures to facilitate legal stay for refugees in a protracted situation.

2. The most common obstacles to return include: fragile or faltering peace processes; continuing insecurity; limited inclusion and participation of refugees in peace processes and repatriation plans; failure to address root causes; destruction and confiscation of housing, land and property; severely overstretched service provision in home locations; and the absence of viable livelihood opportunities. While addressing root causes is primarily the responsibility of countries of origin, their capacity to do so is intrinsically linked to meaningful international support. The Global Compact on Refugees acknowledged that the international community has a responsibility in addressing obstacles to return and facilitating its sustainability.

3. Voluntary repatriation operations have been directly impacted by measures to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in widespread suspension of organized return travel. However, the decline in overall socioeconomic conditions in many hosting countries has triggered returns driven by necessity rather than voluntary choice, returning in often unsustainable circumstances, while protection standards could not always be respected. An increasing number of people returned spontaneously, in particular Venezuelans from across the Americas region and Afghans from neighbouring countries.

4. In 2019, there were notable instances of voluntary repatriation with due consideration of safety and dignity. Approximately 12,400 refugees returned to the Central African Republic from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, following tripartite agreements concluded after a peace agreement was signed between the government and armed groups. To foster the reintegration of displaced populations, UNHCR continued to support the implementation of the National Plan for Reconciliation and Peacebuilding and engaged with authorities and relevant humanitarian and development actors to promote the direct involvement of returnees in all interventions in support of sustainable return.

5. Over 3,000 people returned to Côte d'Ivoire, in accordance with the 2018 roadmap for return and reintegration. In Nigeria, improvements in parts of the north-east, allowed for the repatriation of a first group of 130 Nigerian refugees from Cameroon with the support of UNHCR and the two governments. Some 416,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned to their places of origin in the far north region of Cameroon and in the Central African Republic, Mali and Nigeria. The reintegration of returnees is progressing in the Central African Republic, Chad and Côte d'Ivoire. While large-scale refugee returns are not foreseen to Mali, considering the deteriorating situation in the northern and central regions of the country, some tentative returns of Malian refugees from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania have been observed.

6. Some 25,000 Burundian refugees have returned mainly from the United Republic of Tanzania. While not promoting returns in the current volatile context, UNHCR has helped refugees who decided to return voluntarily, if their decision was based on a free and informed choice and undertaken in conditions of safety and dignity, despite challenges to upholding these standards. Most refugees have returned to Makamba, Kirundo and Ruyigi which are among the poorest and chronically food insecure provinces, lacking the social and economic infrastructure to sustain their reintegration. The 2019 Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (JRRRP) is an integrated response catering for immediate

humanitarian and longer-term resilience and reintegration needs of Burundian refugees who voluntarily repatriate from neighbouring countries. In collaboration with the authorities, humanitarian and development partners of the JRRRP work to meet the objectives of: (a) ensuring the dignified and efficient reception of returnees including registration, profiling, support at the border and transit centres, transport and material assistance for the most vulnerable; (b) ensuring returnees' rights are respected and monitored; (c) creating a safe environment to ensure equitable access to essential services including food, shelter, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, education, and protection as well as critical infrastructure and income generating and self-reliance opportunities within return communities; (d) ensuring durable solutions for displacement-affected populations; (e) and supporting and reinforcing efforts for peaceful coexistence.

7. Following the presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in early 2019, some refugees in Angola approached UNHCR expressing their wish to return home. Consultations and surveys, prepared by UNHCR and partners, showed that 85 per cent of refugees in Lóvua settlement wanted to repatriate. Approximately 14,800 Congolese refugees spontaneously returned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in mid-August. A further 8,000 vulnerable individuals were assisted under a tripartite agreement between the Governments of Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and UNHCR, in support of organized voluntary repatriation.

8. In June 2019, 94 Ethiopian refugees were assisted to repatriate from Sudan and in early 2020, a group of 76 Ethiopian refugees repatriated from Kakuma, Kenya, marking the first major voluntary repatriation programme for Ethiopian refugees in that country. This movement, supported by UNHCR and both governments, is part of a growing trend of thousands of Ethiopian refugees in the region who are choosing to return to their country, following recent developments. More voluntary return movements are expected in the coming months as to date over 10,000 Ethiopian refugees in the region, including those hosted in Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen, have expressed to UNHCR their intention to return home.

9. While Somalia remains one of the largest refugee situations in the world with some 810,500 refugees, their numbers have been declining as a result of return movements. Since the return process started in December 2014, over 90,000 Somali refugees have repatriated from 12 countries of asylum. Most of them from Kenya (84,200) followed by Yemen (with, 4,400), Djibouti (800), Libya (400), Sudan (140), Eritrea (34). For more refugees to be able to return, basic services and infrastructure need to be improved. Inclusion and livelihood activities are also necessary to create conditions conducive for return, as part of the regional application of the comprehensive refugee response framework through the Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and Reintegration of Returnees in Somalia adopted by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

10. With the Afghan refugee situation entering its forty-first year, over 8,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan in 2019, a 50 per cent drop compared with 2018. UNHCR continues to work closely with the Government of Afghanistan and other partners to improve conditions for sustainable return. Reintegration support in Afghanistan reached 357,000 returnees, IDPs and community members in 15 priority areas for return and reintegration that have been identified in close collaboration with the Government. Interventions included cash and in-kind support for vulnerable families; shelter; education; livelihoods, skills training and entrepreneurial support; as well as improving public infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities, community centres and roads, in partnership with both humanitarian and development actors.

11. Despite the complex security and political situation, UNHCR continued to observe self-organized refugee and IDP returns to or in the Syrian Arab Republic. Although significant security challenges remain in certain areas, and insufficient guarantees are in place to allow for large-scale facilitated voluntary repatriation, the pace of returns to and within the Syrian Arab Republic has increased over the last two years. Between November 2018 and January 2019, UNHCR conducted its fifth Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey among Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The majority (75 per cent) continued to hope to return one day, but only 5.9 per cent intended to do so in 2019.

Refugees planning for return continue to highlight an improving security situation, family reunification, and having livelihood opportunities as the main factors influencing their decision. To improve conditions of return, UNHCR strengthened support to and capacity in the areas of documentation, pre-departure vaccination, health referrals, housing, land and property, legal counselling, and return monitoring.

II. Opportunities

12. The absence of conditions conducive to return continued to challenge voluntary repatriation prospects globally. With the number of forcibly displaced rising each year, it is evident that short-term humanitarian support is inadequate to sustain return over the long term. Development action is critical, but cannot be delivered effectively in the absence of security. In 2019, UNHCR renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN Habitat) for focused support to addressing housing, land and property grievances, and with the International Labour Organization to support the economic inclusion of displaced communities. Cooperation has also been strengthened with the United Nations Development Programme to promote an integrated approach to development in at least 13 countries, through a global partnership on rule of law and local governance.

13. With the affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018, the international community recommitted to supporting conditions that enable refugees to exercise their right to return. The GRF included events to foster three significant support platforms: (i) the IGAD support platform for long-term solutions to the refugee situation in the East and Horn of Africa; (ii) the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR); and (iii) the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework in Latin America (MIRPS). Upon the request of the affected States, these platforms aim to help by galvanizing political commitment and advocacy for prevention, protection, response and solutions; mobilizing financial, material and technical assistance; facilitating coherent humanitarian and development responses, including through the early and sustained engagement of development actors in support of host communities and refugees. Strengthening the prospects for voluntary repatriation as an integral element of solutions is in evidence in all three platforms. The Global Compact on Refugees and the GRF emphasized the importance for greater inclusion of refugees in peace processes and decision-making affecting their lives, as an important building block towards achieving sustainable return and reintegration.

14. Several States and other significant stakeholders included voluntary repatriation in their commitments to address the long-term development needs of both refugee and host populations and to support greater resilience and long-term solutions. The Government of Nigeria, in line with the Economic Community of West African States and the Lake Chad Basin Commission Protocols, reiterated its commitment to pursuing regional approaches to address forced displacement and pledged to continue supporting returns in safety and dignity in accordance with relevant international instruments. The Government of South Sudan, in line with the National Framework for Return, Relocation and Reintegration launched in October 2019, pledged to create conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable returns of South Sudanese refugees. It committed to developing and adopting a national policy and framework to address housing, land and property rights, establishing inclusive peace building structures with alternative conflict resolution mechanisms – working with traditional courts, local leaders and peace committees at community level, and enforcing the rule of law and access to justice by establishing strong presence of State organs at all levels. The Federal Government of Somalia adopted a national framework on IDPs and returnees and committed to the relocation and reintegration of 80,000 displaced people within five years, based on the National Development Plan 9. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) extended its cooperation with the African Union in the context of the theme of the year for 2020, “Silencing the Guns”, to support its Member States in creating better conditions for return and reintegration of refugees.

15. This follows on the heels of the African Union’s “Year of Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards durable solutions for forcibly displaced persons in

Africa”, in 2019. Focussing specifically on displaced people, the Africa Union highlighted that the traditional approach to displacement as a purely humanitarian issue needed to be overhauled in favour of greater political and financial support for transition from humanitarian assistance to development cooperation. Opportunities to pursue solutions for IDPs and returnees in the region were bolstered when Equatorial Guinea and South Sudan acceded to the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) in 2019, bringing the total number of accessions to 29. The Kampala Convention remains the world’s only legally binding regional instrument on internal displacement.

III. Conclusion

16. Seventy years ago, the UN General Assembly mandated UNHCR with the task “of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees.” UNHCR started to play an increasingly catalytic role in providing support to States, displaced and host communities, acknowledging that addressing root causes of displacement and securing peace and stability were central to creating conditions that were conducive for return. This required strengthening linkages among humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors. Despite the limited progress in achieving durable solutions for persons of concern to UNHCR in recent years, in particular in relation to the sustainability of return, the momentum generated by the Global Compact on Refugees and GRF can leverage vital support for returns. New approaches to burden- and responsibility-sharing and strengthened international cooperation, with an emphasis on inclusion in national systems, gives hope for the future. UNHCR is determined to work closely with all stakeholders to ensure that the current positive momentum towards solutions translates into further concrete achievements.
