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High Commissioner’s Programme**

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Update on UNHCR operations in West and Central Africa**A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

By the end of 2022, the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR reached 13 million, an increase of 1.1 million compared to the previous year. This figure includes approximately 800,000 newly internally displaced, mainly in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Mali; and some 138,000 refugees who fled from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Nigeria, the Sudan and Mali into neighbouring countries.

Political instability in several countries continued to affect the operational environment in the region. Security remained fragile, as insurgency intensified in some areas and spread further to others resulting in an increase in civilian casualties and forced displacement. Northern Togo, northern Benin and the northern border areas of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana witnessed increased attacks by non-State armed groups.

In the Lake Chad Basin, complex conflict dynamics persisted. A new wave of incursions into Cameroon by non-State armed groups in areas close to the border with Nigeria caused further displacements.

Just like in other parts of the world, the negative impact of rising inflation and increasing prices of fuel and other commodities was severely felt across the region, leading to a rise in social tensions and crime. Humanitarian operations were not immune to this situation. In the Central African Republic, fuel shortages at the end of 2022 had a significant impact on UNHCR operations and impeded access to populations in need.

Furthermore, new policy restrictions affecting cash-based interventions in several countries of the region affected the work of humanitarian actors who were also facing a significant increase in the number of security incidents targeting them.

UNHCR had to scale up its emergency preparedness as well as provide protection and lifesaving assistance to displaced persons in the following four evolving situations:

- Eastern Chad, where a Level-1 emergency was declared in September 2022 following the arrival of some 11,600 refugees from Darfur and where more arrivals are anticipated.
- Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, where the number of arrivals from Burkina Faso reached some 16,500 people by the end of the year. Further preparedness activities are underway to address the needs of potential additional arrivals.
- The Adamawa State of Nigeria, where some 16,000 peoples fleeing violent attacks in the Far North region of Cameroon have arrived since June 2022. Preparedness activities continue in the event of further arrivals.
- The Lake Chad Basin, where heavy rains and floods at the end of 2022 displaced 1.3 million people in Nigeria, 1 million in Chad, 350,000 in the Far North region of Cameroon and over 36,000 people in the Diffa region of Niger. Refugees and displaced people were among the affected communities, where shelters were destroyed, and water points contaminated.

Lake Chad Basin

The security situation in the Northeast of Nigeria remained unstable. Insurgency and counter-insurgency measures, indiscriminate attacks by non-State armed groups fuelled widespread fear, new displacements, and hindered humanitarian access. Some 7,000 Nigerians sought refuge in the Diffa region of Niger following an attack by armed groups in November 2022, resulting in the death of 10 refugee returnees and leaving many seriously injured.

The ongoing biometric verification of Nigerian refugees in the Diffa region, which started in June 2022 has resulted in the registration of some 102,000 refugees by the end of the year.

In December 2022, UNHCR and the Government of Cameroon also commenced the individual verification of some 75,000 refugees living in Minawao camp in the Far North region. By mid-January 2023, a total of 29,069 refugees (38 per cent of the total camp population) were verified and over 2500 identification cards were issued. The verification of the estimated 130,000 refugees is expected to be completed by mid-February 2023.

At the regional level, UNHCR participated in the third donor conference for the Lake Chad Basin held in January 2023 in Niger, which was the first ever organized in a Lake Chad Basin country. The conference was an opportunity to review priorities in the Lake Chad Basin including solutions to the situation of forcibly displaced, and to make new pledges.

Central Sahel

Forced displacement continued to rise in the central Sahel, with some 360,000 persons newly displaced within Burkina Faso between September and December 2022. In addition, in the last six months, some 30,000 Malian refugees fled to Burkina Faso and Niger while more than 11,500 persons from Burkina Faso crossed into Mali and Niger. UNHCR supported the national authorities to register the displaced while actively advocating for the recognition of those who were not yet granted refugee status, particularly in Niger. In addition, approximately 8,450 people from the Northwest of Nigeria fled to Niger to escape violence and insecurity.

Access to the displaced populations was restricted especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, with some major towns still besieged. In Djibo commune of Burkina Faso, which hosts more than 260,000 internally displaced persons and some 8,000 Malian refugees, heavy clashes between government security forces and non-State armed groups in September, had a negative impact on the delivery of assistance by UNHCR and partners and interrupted the biometric verification and registration exercise. The pervasive tactics of armed groups of destroying property and key infrastructure such as grain stores in displacement sites in the Centre-Nord administrative region of Burkina Faso worsened food insecurity, weakened communities and exacerbated vulnerabilities.

Central Africa

The security situation in certain parts of the Central Africa region remained volatile, such as in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon where communities continued to be displaced.

Solutions for displaced Central Africans are being sought through the set-up of the Central African Republic situation support platform. A governance structure for the platform will be adopted in early 2023, together with the establishment of regional and national technical committees, and the development of national action plans in line with the Yaoundé Declaration on solutions in the context of forced displacement related to the Central African crisis of April 2022.

B. Progress and challenges in 2022, and priorities for 2023

Achieving durable solutions

Despite numerous protracted situations in the region and the difficult operational environment, UNHCR continues to take a proactive and ambitious approach to seeking durable solutions for the displaced populations.

A significant development is the successful implementation of the comprehensive solutions strategy for Ivorian refugees which paved the way for the cessation of refugee status for this group on 30 June 2022 and ended one of the most protracted refugee situations in the region. More than 95 per cent of Ivorians have returned to Côte d'Ivoire, enabling the closure of refugee camps in Guinea and Togo, with further closures planned in Ghana in early 2023. Between July and December 2022, UNHCR supported the return and reintegration of more than 5,000 refugees, bringing the total number of Ivorian returnees to 316,000. The Government of Côte d'Ivoire issued passports to former refugees who chose to remain in Togo. A similar documentation process is underway in Ghana, Liberia and Mali and is expected to be completed in early 2023.

A total of 5,000 Central African refugees returned voluntarily in 2022 with the support of UNHCR. A further 12,000 are expected to return from Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Republic of) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2023.

In Diffa, Niger, some 2,000 displaced persons benefited from the construction of over 260 social houses in return locations in the Gueskerou commune. In Cameroon, some 21,000 internally displaced persons and 14,000 refugees displaced during the Logone Birni crisis in 2021 spontaneously returned to their places of origin and received reintegration support from UNHCR. Following several months of discussion between stakeholders in both Cameroon and Nigeria involving regional and state authorities and partners, 1,300 Nigerian refugees living in the far north of Cameroon were voluntarily repatriated in January 2023. Voluntary repatriation convoys from Cameroon will resume in late February 2023 following elections in Nigeria and the plan is to support the repatriation of some 5,000 Nigerian refugees in 2023. In 2023, UNHCR will also support the voluntary repatriation of 5,000 Cameroonian refugees living in Chad, following the conclusion of a tripartite agreement.

Resettlement and complementary pathways

A total of 2,056 refugees were resettled in 2022, and 42 benefitted from complementary pathways of admission to a third country. In addition, 3,912 individuals were submitted for resettlement from the region in 2022 against a regional quota of 3,597, corresponding to 109% delivery rate. Broadening access to resettlement, including the continued development of small-scale sustainable resettlement capacity in smaller operations, remains a key priority for UNHCR in 2023. Alongside the ongoing scale-up of resettlement capacity in the West and Central Africa region, increased integrity initiatives, including strengthening of fraud prevention and response, will be prioritized with extensive digital campaigns in the first quarter of 2023.

Improving asylum systems

A new asylum law was adopted in Benin in November 2022, while progress on asylum reforms was made in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Niger. In Niger, the authorities worked with their French counterparts through the Asylum Capacity Support Group on improving the quality of decision-making and classification systems. In Cameroon, the authorities developed a targeted plan to reduce the backlog of asylum cases. In response to the increasing number of refugees arriving from the Sahel, particularly in coastal countries, UNHCR is assisting States with registration and processing of asylum applications from refugees falling under Article I(2) of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Following the enactment of the cessation clause, more than 1,500 refugees from Cote d'Ivoire in Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, and Togo have sought exemption from cessation and benefited from fair and expeditious procedures.

Mixed movements

More than 11,000 people on the move were identified and screened by community-based monitors along mixed-flow routes across the region between October and December 2022, resulting in the referral of 4,000 people to existing protection services as an alternative to risky onward movement. During the same period, 200 border officials and community members across the region were trained on international protection in the context of mixed movements with a view to improving timely identification and referral. Some

3,200 individuals received up-to-date information on protection risks in transit and alternatives to dangerous journeys. UNHCR and International Organization for Migration agreed to operationalize their new framework of engagement in West and Central Africa in 2023 through joint identification and referral, communication with communities and capacity building of local actors along specific routes.

Support to internally displaced persons legal framework

The domestication of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) continues to be a priority in the countries experiencing internal displacement across the region. Nigeria took important steps with the adoption of a national policy on internal displacement in 2022, while targeted consultations with local actors were held in Burkina Faso.

Project 21: regional inter-agency protection monitoring

Project 21, which is an inter-agency protection monitoring system, using a common methodology and tools, has been conducting joint analyses in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger. The results from this initiative are used to support the work of the protection clusters, increasingly informing humanitarian planning and response and contributing to targeted advocacy. In 2023, coverage will be expanded to the coastal countries affected by the Sahel crisis.

Gender-based violence

By the end of 2022, the Project 21 monitoring sites reported a high occurrence of incidents of gender-based violence with the number of incidents doubling since April 2022. Some 95 per cent of reported incidents were against women and girls and they remain vulnerable. UNHCR made significant efforts to help mitigate the situation and respond to incidents. Just in the last quarter of 2022, the *Ma Mbi Si* Green Line (a free telephone hotline that easily connects survivors with services, especially those in remote locations) in the Central African Republic provided psychosocial counselling through 310 calls, 65 per cent of which were related to gender-based violence. In Chad, male-only prevention committees raised awareness on the need to address gender-based violence in their communities, reaching thousands of people. In 2023, life-saving interventions will continue to be prioritized and increased efforts will be made to strengthen the capacities of women-led organizations and to work with them.

Accountability to displaced and stateless people, especially women and children

Regional initiatives to roll-out UNHCR's operational guidance for accountability to affected people and to improve connectivity through digital community engagement projects were ongoing during 2022. These included digital literacy training and equipment for 400 displaced families/community mobilizers in Mali; rural radio programmes in Chad reaching some 20,000 refugees and leaders; and campaigns in Chad, Mali and Niger reaching an estimated 86,000 displaced persons. Digital solutions such as Infoline (a digital information service allowing people to have access to information on services available in local languages) in Burkina Faso, Mali, community-based audio reporting in Cameroon and digital centres in Chad and Mali benefited thousands of families. These mechanisms allowed communities to be more meaningfully and consistently involved in decisions that affect their lives.

Education

There was a slight increase in the refugee school enrolment rates at secondary and tertiary levels in the region. However, school closures in certain regions of the coastal countries, bordering Burkina Faso due to the deteriorating security situation has hampered access to education for newly arrived refugees. With nearly 400,000 refugee children out of school and approximately 14,000 schools closed across the region at the end of 2022, promoting access to education for displaced children will remain a priority in 2023.

Reducing, preventing and eradicating statelessness

A regional model law on the protection of stateless persons, statelessness determination procedures and naturalization was developed in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa and is awaiting approval by experts. The establishment of a regional civil society network on statelessness is underway and is expected to be fully operational in 2023. At country level, Benin adopted a law on the status of stateless persons and a new nationality code establishing statelessness determination procedures in November 2022.

In 2023, UNHCR will follow up on the progress made on nationality law reforms in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia.

Socioeconomic inclusion and cash-based interventions

To ensure access to basic needs and services, UNHCR together with the UNHCR and World Bank Joint Data Centre conducted studies on the financial inclusion of refugees and internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic. A study was also conducted on the existing social protection programmes in the region to assess their capacity to include refugees and internally displaced persons in these programmes. A forced displacement survey will be rolled out in several countries in 2023. In Cameroon, forcibly displaced will be included in the population census for the first time.

Climate action

Given the impact of climate change and other climate-related shocks in the region, UNHCR will develop a climate action plan in 2023 to adapt its programming across the region with a focus on long-term climate sustainability. In 2022, several initiatives were launched across the region including tree plantation, rehabilitation of degraded land, environmental awareness activities with refugees and host communities, use of alternative energy sources such as solar water systems, use of liquefied petroleum gas for cooking, as well as improving solid waste management.

Global Compact on Refugees and strategic partnerships

Strategic dialogues were held with key development actors in 2022 to pursue the social, financial, economic, and digital inclusion of displaced people in long-term policies and programmes.

UNHCR participated in various coordination mechanisms, including the United Nations-led Humanitarian-Peace-Development Nexus in Cameroon and the United Nations Sustainable Development and Cooperation Framework drafting process in Ghana. These collaborations supported the development of solutions-oriented national policy instruments, such as the National Strategy for Recovery and Durable Solutions in Burkina Faso, the Return Strategy in Niger, and the Action Plan for Durable Solutions in Mali.

At the sub-regional level, ECOWAS adopted a multi-annual action plan in the context of the Global Compact on Refugees. Efforts are ongoing to finalize a joint multi-year plan to implement the solutions-focused partnership between UNHCR and the Economic Community of Central African States. This includes support for the forthcoming Central African Republic situation support platform and the strengthening of the legal and policy framework for protection.

Evaluations

Six evaluations were undertaken in 2022, with three finalized in the last quarter on: i) the UNHCR response to multiple emergencies in the Central Sahel region; ii) the livelihoods and economic inclusion project in Eastern Chad; and iii) the regional shelter and settlement programme.

C. Financial information, including 2023 updated budget figures

As of January 2023, UNHCR's financial requirements for the region stood at \$896.5 million, of which 10 per cent has been funded as of 13 January 2023, without taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
