

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner’s Programme**

Distr.: restricted
6 March 2024

Original: English and French

**Standing Committee
Eighty-ninth meeting**

Update on UNHCR operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis including new developments

UNHCR was confronted with multiple emergencies in the Middle East and North Africa region in 2023, including natural disasters and new and ongoing conflicts. These included the earthquakes in the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye, massive flooding in Libya, displacement in Egypt as a result of the conflict in Sudan, and displacement in Mauritania due to increased insecurity in Mali. The unfolding war in Gaza continues to have widespread regional peace and security implications, including the intensification of cross-border clashes between Israel and Lebanon, which have displaced more than 80,000 people, and attacks against commercial ships in the Red Sea.

Against this backdrop, the region saw an increase in persons of concern to UNHCR in 2023, with new registrations rising 63 per cent, primarily as a result of the outflow from the Sudan. Lebanon and Jordan remain the largest hosting countries, followed by Egypt and Iraq, with the Syrian Arab Republic the primary country of origin. Meanwhile, there has been a decrease in the number of internally displaced persons in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

Syria situation

In its thirteenth year, the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic remains the largest in terms of population movements, with over 12 million people being forcibly displaced across the region. The neighbouring countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye continue to host close to 6 million Syrians, while the socioeconomic conditions and vulnerabilities of the populations worsened in many local areas.

UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) continued to co-lead the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, focused on protecting people, promoting durable solutions, contributing to dignified lives, and enhancing local and national capacities with a long-term, solutions-orientated response. Under the plan, a new regional advocacy working group was established to strengthen strategic joint advocacy, resource mobilization (given declining funding), and opportunities to promote inclusive policies for refugees and host communities in the countries falling under the plan.

The humanitarian needs inside the Syrian Arab Republic intensified following the February 2023 earthquakes. An estimated 16.7 million people were in need of assistance, up from 15.3 million in 2023. Deteriorating economic conditions were also a factor, with many basic services collapsed, shortages of basic commodities, and a significant depreciation of the national currency. Despite this, funding for the Syrian refugee crisis has declined, exacerbating the already deteriorating protection environment and increasing pressure on host governments and communities.

During the second half of 2023, armed conflict in the north-west and north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic escalated, triggering displacement and resulting in the disruption of essential services. The hostilities in Idleb were the most significant since 2019. In 2024, the cross-border relief operation will remain essential to meet the needs of some 4.1 million people in north-west Syria.

Notwithstanding a number of political initiatives in 2023, the conditions inside the Syrian Arab Republic were not yet conducive for the facilitation of large-scale voluntary returns. Some 37,500 refugees are known to have returned in 2023, a decrease from 51,000 refugees who opted to return in 2022.

In 2024, UNHCR will support solutions and early recovery inside the Syrian Arab Republic for the internally displaced and for those who have returned. Efforts will focus on strengthening the resilience of communities through an area-based approach, promoting the sustainability of return and reintegration. In the region, UNHCR will strive to strengthen protection, inclusion and livelihoods, while advocating solutions.

Iraq situation

In Iraq, UNHCR is building the capacity of national systems to enhance the protection environment for displaced and stateless people. The aim is to better equip these communities to mitigate their protection risks and access solutions, while strengthening their resilience.

Some 1.1 million Iraqis continue to be internally displaced, including almost 160,000 residing in 23 camps across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. UNHCR, on behalf of the humanitarian community, leads on solutions for internally displaced persons in camps, in cooperation with the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government and in line with the three solutions in the Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. UNHCR is supporting the Ministry of Interior to ensure access to civil documentation and successfully advocated an assessment of the camp populations to ensure they would be eligible for inclusion in the country's social safety net.

In January 2024, Iraq's Prime Minister took a decision to close the 23 camps by end of July 2024. This will require coordination with the KRG and IDPs being given information to make a free choice, including about local integration if they do not want to return home.

More than 200,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers are hosted in neighbouring countries. UNHCR will continue to support Iraqi refugees in the region with third-country resettlement opportunities.

North Africa

In 2023, the largest groups registering as asylum-seekers in the region were from the Sudan (75 per cent), South Sudan (6 per cent), and the Syrian Arab Republic (6 per cent). Of these, 39 per cent were children, while 32 per cent were women.

With protracted and new conflicts impacting the region, UNHCR increasingly observed onward movements of refugees to and within North Africa, as well as across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, particularly from the Sudan. UNHCR and partners are strengthening communication with those on the move to advise about the risks of irregular onward movements and alternative protection and assistance options.

Movements by sea from North Africa to Europe continued, with arrivals in Italy from Tunisia almost quadrupling in 2023 and a 20 per cent increase in arrivals in Italy from Libya. Crossings to Spain via the Mediterranean Sea increased by 19 per cent, while arrivals to the Canary Islands more than doubled, with most having departed from West Africa. Arrivals to Yemen by sea also increased by 33 per cent.

At least 2,670 refugees and migrants are known to have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in 2023. A further 887 people are known to have died trying to reach the Canary Islands. UNHCR continues to work with the concerned authorities and partners to implement its regional routes-based strategy, with the aim of strengthening access to protection and solutions at the first point of encounter. The strategy includes short-term measures to address the immediate needs and longer-term interventions to strengthen access to national protection systems.

In **Egypt**, since the latest wave of conflict commenced in the Sudan in April 2023, UNHCR has registered 140,000 Sudanese refugees. It provides protection and assistance to registered refugees, and some 54,500 vulnerable individuals have already received emergency cash assistance. UNHCR has also provided core relief items and water to the Egyptian Red Crescent for transportation to Gaza and is facilitating protection training for the Egyptian Red Crescent volunteers deployed to the border.

Mauritania received an influx of some 55,000 displaced individuals from Mali by the end of 2023, due to political instability coupled with the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. There are currently 104,000 refugees in Mbera camp and 49,000 in urban areas in Hodh Chargui, as well as some 7,600 refugees and asylum-seekers in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. UNHCR provides psychosocial counselling, cash assistance, hygiene kits and other core relief items, and supports community structures and access to basic services, such as healthcare, emergency shelter, education and water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

In **Libya**, the total number of displaced people fell from 135,000 in July 2023 to 54,000 by December 2023. Despite a restrictive operating environment, UNHCR is committed to continue providing protection for displaced people at its community day centres and offering life-saving assistance at detention centres and disembarkation points. In 2024, UNHCR will continue supporting the relocation of forcibly displaced persons through the emergency transit mechanism to the Niger and Rwanda.

In **Algeria**, around 12,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR. The current situation in Mali may also trigger an influx in the south. UNHCR is working towards greater financial support for the Sahrawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf, in line with the Sahrawi Refugee Response Plan led by the United Nations, which appeals for \$214 million to provide humanitarian assistance in the camps in 2024 and 2025, while contributing resources and expertise to strengthen capacity for individual registration and documentation.

More than 19,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR in **Morocco**. UNHCR ensures vital protection services, including registration, refugee status determination, legal assistance and emergency housing.

While primarily a country of transit, some 15,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR in **Tunisia**. UNHCR stands ready to support the authorities in developing a sustainable and comprehensive approach to asylum management in the context of mixed movements.

Gulf Cooperation Council

Resource mobilization activities continued across the region in countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, raising \$90.3 million as of December 2023. This includes funding contributed by public and private sectors.

Israel

Israel hosts some 26,700 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Eritrea and the Sudan. In addition, an estimated 30,000 Ukrainians in Israel are in need of international protection. UNHCR ensures access to rights and essential services for people seeking

asylum and supports the authorities and other stakeholders on refugee status determination and individual case processing.

Yemen

After almost 10 years of devastating and unrelenting conflict, more than 21.6 million Yemenis (two thirds of the total population) depend on humanitarian assistance. In 2023, the number of internally displaced persons rose to more than 4.5 million. The country also continues to host some 72,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Ethiopia and Somalia. UNHCR remains the sole international organization protecting and assisting refugees in Yemen. By mid-2023, refugee registration by the authorities resumed in the north, having been suspended since 2016.

The provision of legal assistance, including to civil status documentation and registration, will be prioritized. This is in addition to psychosocial counselling and the referral of vulnerable cases to specialized services. Cash assistance will remain a critical protection tool, though the number of beneficiaries has been reduced due to underfunding. While durable solutions remain elusive, the resumption of the UNHCR voluntary repatriation programme for Somali refugees will support an estimated 2,500 refugees and asylum-seekers to return home in 2024. Over 1,400 individuals returned voluntarily by boat in 2023.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2023 and updated plans for 2024

Attaining a favourable protection environment

In 2023, over 323,000 individuals were newly registered with UNHCR across the region, a 62 per cent increase compared to 2022, primarily as a result of the conflict in the Sudan. Of these, 53 per cent were male and 51 per cent aged between 15-49 years. There was a slight decrease in the number of internally displaced persons in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

UNHCR continued to conduct refugee status determination under its mandate in 17 of the 18 countries in the region. Refugee status determination remains a critical protection tool, ensuring access to rights and assistance, and facilitating solutions. UNHCR published relevant country guidance and country of origin information to refugee status adjudicators, including updated country of origin information on the internal flight or relocation alternative in Iraq. Updated international protection considerations on Iraq have been issued in January 2024, and country of origin information on the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon will be issued in 2024.

In 2024, UNHCR will continue to undertake varied measures to prevent and reduce statelessness and to identify and protect stateless people. These include the provision of legal assistance, support to relevant authorities in issuing civil documentation, studies informing evidence-based interventions, capacity-building and advocacy.

UNHCR will provide learning opportunities on accountability to affected people and localization for its staff, partners and community-led organizations. Digital tools and communication channels will help increase outreach to a wide range of persons of concern, ensuring an age, gender and diversity perspective. Grants will be provided to community and grassroots organizations, and the regional Community Protection Network will be supported to empower communities. Access to social protection systems for people with specific needs will be promoted in coordination with governments and through research and community engagement.

Realizing rights in safe environments

There are around 2.3 million school-aged persons of concern to UNHCR in the region who are affected by complex protection challenges, school dropouts and limited future

prospects for employment. In addition, at all education levels, there is a significant gender gap in favour of males and a gender dimension to retention, with enrolment among refugee girls dropping as they progress through the education systems. In response, UNHCR is working with governments and partners to address barriers to access education, including through remote and hybrid learning modalities, and to support the safe return to schools and retention in learning through remedial programmes. The region has made important progress in tertiary education. Nearly 111,500 refugee students are enrolled in tertiary education, including with support provided through the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) and other scholarship programmes. Refugees have access to other post-secondary skills training or technical and vocational education and training in some countries, though participation is limited due to high fees, language barriers and administrative restrictions.

Some 900,000 people led or participated in community-based protection activities aimed at responding to increasing protection needs in the region. These included awareness-raising activities to strengthen child protection and address gender-based violence, protect people with disabilities, enhance social cohesion, foster peaceful coexistence and provide community peer support. In 2024, UNHCR operations and partners will strengthen accountability mechanisms and promote inclusion and self-reliance.

By the end of September 2023, over 74,000 children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye had benefited from specialized services, while over 78,000 had participated in structured child protection and psychosocial support programmes and close to 15,000 women and men benefited from parenting support. Collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) advanced through the rollout of the UNICEF-UNHCR Strategic Collaboration Framework, while collaboration on the “No Lost Generation” initiative to support youth and children affected by the Syrian crisis continued.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

UNHCR remains committed to ensuring community empowerment, enhancing social cohesion and strengthening the participation of persons of concern in the decisions that affect their lives. The PROSPECTS partnership¹ is supporting positive protection outcomes in the region, contributing to inclusion and the participation of persons of concern, and promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Dedicated grants helped empower women, youth and people with disabilities in Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen. In 2024, social cohesion and self-reliance will be further promoted through increased coordination with United Nations partners, non-governmental organizations, national institutions, civil society and community organizations.

A digital participatory tool has increased qualitative protection analysis in Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Iraq, facilitating the engagement of 13,000 community members in programme planning, implementation and monitoring, and 6,250 women and girls, 700 people with disabilities and other persons of concern in structured dialogues. Call centres in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya responded to over 1 million calls, enhancing community engagement. Eighteen new members joined the regional Community Protection Network, supporting the identification of and response to emerging protection risks. Digital solutions and two-way communication channels will continue to be promoted to enhance participation and evidence-based protection analysis. Empowerment, leadership and coordination with community, refugee, youth and women-

¹ Known as PROSPECTS, this partnership is funded by the Netherlands (Kingdom of) and brings together the International Finance Corporation, the International Labour Organization, UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Bank, with the aim of improving access to employment and livelihood opportunities for displaced and host communities.

led organizations will continue to be pursued through the regional Community Protection Network and targeted financial and technical support will be provided to its members.

Preventing, mitigating and responding to gender-based violence remains a priority for the region. In 2023, over 27,900 survivors and people at risk of gender-based violence benefited from response services through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for Syrian refugees in Egypt and Lebanon. Despite these efforts, impeded access to health care, protection and justice are preventing many survivors from getting the support they need. Other barriers include legal and political gaps, limited institutional capacities, inadequate and insufficient services, fear of stigma and retaliation, and a lack of trust in services.

Funding from the Safe from the Start initiative helped strengthen measures to prevent and address gender-based violence. Dedicated support was provided to the operation in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic towards this aim through the temporary deployment of a roving staff member dedicated to addressing this issue.

Securing solutions

In 2023, UNHCR submitted the resettlement cases of over 25,700 refugees from the region, an increase of around 5 per cent compared to 2022. In addition, some 16,800 resettlement cases were submitted for refugees from the region in Türkiye. An estimated 848,000 refugees in the region and Türkiye are in need of resettlement in 2024.

In 2024, UNHCR will continue to help safeguard the resettlement process by ensuring oversight in this area. It will implement the updated anti-fraud policy, while maintaining the regional Integrity Community of Practice and expanding the regional Integrity Working Group.

Following a key recommendation from the regional Contact Group on Complementary Pathways, local coordination structures have been established by UNHCR and its partners in a number of countries. Working groups at the local level are helping to expand networks, map out services and strengthen information-sharing to enhance access to complementary pathways.

Between 2016 and November 2023, some 389,000 Syrian refugees returned home from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye. Compared to 2022, there was a reduction of over 10,000 individuals returning to the Syrian Arab Republic in 2023, and the monthly average of returns in 2023 dropped to 3,100 individuals from a monthly average of 4,300 in 2022. While the number of those returning is below the levels seen prior to the pandemic, UNHCR and partners maintained and strengthened preparedness and planning for returns, guided by the Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy and the Global Compact on Refugees. In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR provides returning refugees and other vulnerable populations with humanitarian assistance and other services through a network of community centres. In parallel, dialogue is underway with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to address obstacles to voluntary return.

Mobilizing public, political, financial and operational support through strategic partnerships

Building on support mobilized through a series of events convened by UNHCR ahead of and during the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, UNHCR will continue to promote the protection of forcibly displaced people and encourage inclusive policies. Creating space for dialogue among diverse stakeholders and leveraging the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum will be key in this regard.

In line with UNHCR's localization efforts, the engagement of local civil society organizations was a priority during the regional consultations with non-governmental organizations in 2023, and work in this area will continue ahead of the global consultations with non-governmental organizations in 2024. Civil society and

refugee-led organizations from the region had strong representation at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum and participated in several multi-stakeholder pledges, reflecting their frontline role in the delivery of a wide range of services to address the needs of displaced people and host communities across the region. UNHCR continues to invest in its partnership with the League of Arab States to advance refugee protection and inclusion, building on pledges and commitments announced during the Global Refugee Forum by States and other stakeholders in support of refugee and host communities.

UNHCR aims to strengthen development cooperation in the region, including by increasing engagement with the World Bank in Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. In 2024, additional resources will be invested in social protection activities and measures to enhance the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees. UNHCR will also continue to encourage the inclusion of refugees in national statistics systems.

C. Financial information

In October 2023, the Executive Committee approved the 2024 budget of \$2,341.8 million for the region. This is less than the 2023 original budget of \$2,470.1 million, representing a 5.2 per cent decrease, and is driven by the global decrease in budgets.

As of 31 January 2024, some 12 per cent of the region's 2024 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
