

Update on UNHCR's operations in southern Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

At the end of 2023, southern Africa hosted 10.1 million forcibly displaced persons and returnees, 7 million of whom were internally displaced by conflict in their countries and nearly 1 million of whom were refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition, the region also hosted 1 million people who were internally displaced by the impact of climate change. The complex crises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique were the main drivers of forced displacement in the region. At the same time, protracted refugee situations persisted in Angola, the Congo (Republic of), Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The operational context in southern Africa was plagued by socioeconomic inequalities, conflict, food insecurity, outbreaks of diseases and natural disasters. Factors such as funding shortfalls and the effects of other global crises have aggravated the situation, and these issues are expected to persist in 2024. In 2023, concerns around restrictions to access to asylum and gender-based violence increased across the region, following the order of relocation of refugees and asylum-seekers to Dzaleka camp in Malawi and rising instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Infectious diseases and recurring illnesses such as cholera further strained the already-fragile health services in the region, and tropical storms and cyclones brought devastation to communities in multiple countries. Moreover, seven countries were impacted by ration cuts, leading to a rise in food insecurity. As a result, humanitarian needs increased across southern Africa in 2023, as did mixed movements of migrants and asylum-seekers. In 2024, the El Niño phenomenon and breaks in the food pipeline are expected to pose additional challenges in the region.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo remains one of the most critically underfunded humanitarian situations in the world. Cyclical violence has internally displaced some 6 million people and forced over 1 million to cross international borders in search of safety. The Democratic Republic of the Congo also continues to host over half a million refugees (mainly from Burundi, the Central African Republic and Rwanda), the largest number in southern Africa. Since early 2023, intensifying conflict, acute food insecurity and an increase in protection incidents in the country have led to rounds of forced displacement. The phased withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2024 may bring further instability, which could result in increased needs and affect the humanitarian response. UNHCR is leading the protection, camp coordination and camp management, and shelter clusters in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Democratic Republic of the Congo Situation, which covers the response in Angola, Burundi, the Congo (Republic of), Rwanda, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

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

Attaining a favourable protection environment

Despite all 16 countries in southern Africa being signatories to the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and 14 out of 16 countries having ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, there have been trends towards the contraction of the asylum space in the region. Notably, restrictive policies led to some 50 cases of refoulement and over 1,700 cases of refugee detention in 2023. UNHCR continues to

strengthen engagement with States and regional bodies to ensure adherence to the principle of non-refoulement and for alternatives to detention. Specifically, UNHCR has provided support to Malawi and Zambia to carry out legislative reforms to improve the living conditions and overall well-being of refugees. In 2024, UNHCR will continue to promote accession to, and ratification of, relevant international and regional treaties on displacement and statelessness. UNHCR will also continue to advocate for the lifting of reservations made by 11 States to 18 provisions of the 1951 Refugee Convention and to advance capacity-building initiatives with United Nations agencies and other relevant stakeholders, such as the International Detention Coalition, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges, and the Universities of Cape Town and Pretoria.

In 2023, the Congo (Republic of) and Mozambique conducted refugee verification exercises, while Angola resumed registration activities, which had been suspended since 2015. However, concerns persist with regard to documentation due to pending verifications, limited funding and inadequate governmental systems and processes. UNHCR is assisting countries across southern Africa to enhance their asylum processing capacities, with a focus on the Indian Ocean islands and two countries that have suspended refugee status determination procedures. The general lack of capacity in the region resulted in a backlog of over 179,300 asylum claims as of December 2023. A joint UNHCR and SADC regional workshop took stock of the implementation of the 2022 SADC asylum action plan, resulting in the agreement by SADC Member States to prioritize legislative reforms, investment in registration and data management, and implementation of differentiated case processing modalities. In 2024, a regional platform on asylum will be established with SADC to address asylum issues through a “whole-of-society” approach. Moreover, UNHCR will continue to assist Governments to improve decision-making in refugee status determination processing.

Recognizing the significance of mixed and onward movements in southern Africa, a regional route-based approach was developed in 2023 to strengthen protection along the southern route, which extends from the East and Horn of Africa to South Africa. This strategy encompasses the provision of support for States to address asylum cases identified in mixed population flows, legislative reforms to advance the implementation of the 2022 SADC migration policy framework, the revitalization of the UNHCR-International Organization for Migration (IOM) task force on mixed movements, and the adoption of a mixed movements regional response plan. Joint UNHCR-IOM workshops were held in Madagascar and Zimbabwe to build the capacity of government officials, and regional dialogues on mixed movements were held in Zambia and Mozambique to improve national labour migration laws and address irregular migration. Given the lack of comprehensive and standardized data needed for adequate planning, UNHCR and IOM have agreed to reinforce collaboration through regular information-sharing in 2024. UNHCR will also continue its collaboration with States, regional bodies and other partners to implement a comprehensive approach to address mixed movements in the southern and Indian Ocean routes.

In 2024, age, gender, and diversity will remain a priority in programming. In 2023, forcibly displaced women and girls, especially those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, faced increased risks of gender-based violence, and humanitarian actors struggled with a lack of resources to adequately respond to the needs. UNHCR will strengthen coordination and programming to protect women and girls and consistently conduct policy monitoring to ensure that gender-based violence risk mitigation is integrated into all sectors of its work. Key interventions will focus on promoting women's leadership, strengthening positive masculinity, and providing psychosocial support, cash assistance and legal assistance to vulnerable groups. As part of the efforts to combat sexual exploitation and abuse, UNHCR will expand the rollout of a training package on the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, which was introduced in UNHCR offices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, the regional representation in South Africa, and Zambia. UNHCR also ensured that capacity assessments were conducted in the region on United Nations Implementing Partner Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and partners who scored at low or medium capacity will be supported through the capacity strengthening implementation plan. In addition, UNHCR will continue to engage with communities to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. Lastly, UNHCR will continue to work with United Nations agencies and other partners to mainstream child protection in their response and promote the inclusion of forcibly displaced children in national systems. Emphasis will be given to the implementation of the

Global Child Protection Inclusivity Index and to registration efforts as a means of combatting statelessness and ensuring access to essential services.

In June 2023, UNHCR convened stakeholders at the regional and country levels to take stock of the 146 pledges made during the first Global Refugee Forum, held in 2019, and to explore priority areas. By end-2023, only 14 per cent of pledges to the Global Compact on Refugees had been completed, 73 per cent were in progress, and 13 per cent were in the planning stage. The second Global Refugee Forum, held in 2023, received over 56 new pledges for the region, ranging from law and policy matters to empowerment and solutions. In 2024, UNHCR will continue to support States and partners with the implementation of the commitments from both Global Refugee Forums.

Realizing rights in safe environments

Eight countries in southern Africa have been identified as some of the world's most vulnerable to the impact of climate change. In March 2023, Tropical Cyclone Freddy caused nearly 700 deaths, displaced 660,000 people and destroyed over 200,000 hectares of crops in Malawi. It also affected 1 million people and displaced some 184,000 individuals in Mozambique. To address the pressing issues of fragility, forced displacement and climate resilience in the region, UNHCR will continue to build local capacity for preparedness and response and to push for the creation of a regional contingency stock. UNHCR, SADC and the African Development Bank conducted a technical meeting in 2023, to strengthen the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless individuals in national and regional development plans and programmes while promoting the effective management of challenges related to climate change. In 2024, UNHCR will continue its engagement with these entities for the High-Level Ministerial Strategic Forum on forced displacement, fragility mitigation and climate resilience in southern Africa.

The situation of refugees and asylum-seekers across southern Africa with regard to food and nutrition remains challenging, given the widespread ration cuts in the second half of 2023 and food pipeline breaks expected in 2024. To mitigate the impact of these challenges, UNHCR will continue to assess the needs of vulnerable groups and invest in livelihood opportunities. Four countries will undertake standardized expanded nutrition surveys to improve the availability of nutrition-related data, which is expected to contribute to evidence-based advocacy.

In 2023, significant challenges were faced in the health sector, as most countries in the region struggled with outbreaks of diseases including measles, cholera, polio and monkeypox. UNHCR strengthened collaboration with the World Health Organization and conducted assessments in Angola, the Congo (Republic of), Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe to monitor the quality of health services. In 2024, UNHCR will focus on improving collection and quality of health information; strengthening preparedness and response to health emergencies; enhancing nutrition surveillance; and including refugees in national health systems.

The water and sanitation context is marked by significant variations and is affected by the ongoing arrival of people. UNHCR and partners provide water and sanitation services to refugees and asylum-seekers in camps and settlements across the region. However, due to underinvestment in the sector and limited water resources in some areas, most refugee camps fall short of the post-emergency target of 20 litres of water per person, per day. In 2023, UNHCR piloted real-time monitoring technology in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe in order to obtain independent and timely data on water supply network performance for analysis and optimization of water supply systems. In 2024, UNHCR will continue efforts to improve sanitation and healthcare, in collaboration with specialized agencies.

UNHCR is implementing cash-based interventions in 10 countries in the region (Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe). In 2023, some 80,700 individuals received cash assistance to cover their basic needs. Several UNHCR operations also used cash assistance to support individuals in the context of voluntary repatriation and emergencies. However, insecurity and limited resources continued to be impediments towards systematizing cash assistance as a standard modality in the region. In 2024, the UNHCR offices

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the regional representation in South Africa, and Zambia plan to reach 10,000 individuals with cash assistance.

The shelter strategy of UNHCR is anchored in the construction of climate-resilient settlements using local materials and with the involvement of affected populations. In 2023, UNHCR supported more than 40,000 people with the construction of shelters in sites around Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Mozambique, UNHCR and partners completed the construction of over 100 shelters in Corrane settlement in November 2023, while over 1,700 families were supported with shelter interventions in Cabo Delgado during the same month. In 2024, UNHCR will focus on improving tools and frameworks to collect, manage, analyse and share information related to shelter and settlements.

Empower communities and achieve gender equality

In 2023, UNHCR and partners supported nearly 100,000 refugee children, 48 per cent of whom were girls, to access education in southern Africa – an increase of 11 per cent compared to 2022. However, despite the progress made, the gross enrolment rates for refugees and asylum-seekers in primary, secondary and tertiary education in the region remained below the global average. In 2024, UNHCR will emphasize building new partnerships to continue to advocate improved access to education and to ensure that no child is left behind in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

UNHCR will conclude the implementation of its four-year regional livelihoods and economic inclusion strategy in 2024. Since its launch in 2021, UNHCR programmes have supported around 35,000 forcibly displaced people, and another 15,000 individuals will be assisted by UNHCR programmes in 2024 – this amounts to only 2 per cent of the total in need. UNHCR will strengthen and expand partnerships with States, United Nations agencies, donors, the private sector and development actors to accelerate inclusion and promote self-reliance to address the persistently high levels of vulnerability across the region. In particular, UNHCR will follow up with stakeholders to advance the 18 pledges for the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in socioeconomic programmes made at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. UNHCR will continue the collaboration with the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization on multi-year interventions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Eswatini to assist 286,000 and 2,600 forcibly displaced people, respectively, with farming and agricultural initiatives to promote livelihoods, economic inclusion and entrepreneurship. When feasible, initiatives such as the farmer support programme in Zambia, the Pro-Azul fisheries project in Mozambique, and the insect farming pilot projects in Malawi and Zimbabwe will be expanded.

Strengthening community mechanisms as part of efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence will remain key. In 2023, UNHCR supported two organizations lead by women which serve internally displaced people and their host communities in North Kivu, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Malawi, focus was placed on strengthening the access to education and the empowerment of girls in Dzaleka camp; as a result, the gender parity index in the camp rose from less than 0.7 in 2022 to 1.0 in 2023. In 2024, key recommendations linked to gender equality from the regional non-governmental organization consultations held in 2023 will be pursued. They include investing in initiatives lead by women and promoting partnerships with local actors; strengthening the participation of women in decision-making, planning, and implementation; and promoting legal reforms to recognize and address gender issues.

Secure solutions

Southern Africa is affected by low rates of birth registration and lack of data on statelessness. To address these two issues, UNHCR drafted standard operating procedures for birth registration of vulnerable children and shared them with countries in the region. Advocacy with national statistics agencies in the Congo (Republic of), South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe led to the incorporation of proxy statelessness questions in their respective census questionnaires. Following the accession by the Congo (Republic of) to the statelessness conventions in 2023, UNHCR will continue to provide technical support for States to finalize and adopt national action plans to eradicate statelessness.

Voluntary repatriation remains the most viable durable solution in the region, with over 11,000 refugees repatriated between January and December 2023. However, reduced funding continues to affect the implementation of activities, and there are indications that repatriation is not always sustainable, with pendular movements of returnees being observed due to the resurgence of generalized violence in areas of return in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In 2023, UNHCR submitted cases of over 9,000 refugees for resettlement (an increase of 32.5 per cent in comparison to 2022) and more than 3,600 people were supported to depart (an increase of 22 per cent from 2022). UNHCR also invested in complementary pathways by establishing partnerships with Talent Beyond Boundaries, Talent Lift and the Canadian Economic Mobility Pilot Programme. UNHCR will further expand initiatives linked to complementary pathways in 2024 to support an alternative avenue of durable solutions for refugees.

C. Financial information

In October 2023, the Executive approved the 2024 budget of \$492.2 million for the southern Africa region. This number represents an increase of \$20.7 million compared to the 2023 original budget of \$471.5 million. The breakdown of the region’s 2024 budget per impact area is as follows: “protect: attaining favourable protection environments”, \$174.1 million; “respond: realizing rights in safe environments”, \$127.7 million; “solve: securing solutions”, \$100.1 million and “empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality”, \$90.2 million.

As of 31 January 2024, 11 per cent of the southern Africa region’s 2024 financial requirements were funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
