

Update on UNHCR operations in West and Central Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

In 2024, the number of forcibly displaced and stateless people is expected to rise to 14.3 million in the West and Central Africa region, of which 8.2 million will be internally displaced persons. Political instability, new and protracted conflicts and insecurity remain the main causes of displacement. Increased competition over resources due to the effects of climate change, poverty and inflation are also compounding humanitarian needs.

The Sudan situation (the Central African Republic and Chad)

The crisis in the Sudan caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee to the Central African Republic and Chad. Since April 2023, Chad has seen the arrival of over 542,000 Sudanese, and in response, UNHCR has supported the relocation of refugees to existing and new camps and reinforced its emergency response capacity. In total, approximately 1.1 million Sudanese refugees are being hosted in Chad, including those who were present in the country before the onset of the current crisis. In 2024, a further 250,000 Sudanese are expected to arrive in Chad. In addition, neighbouring Central African Republic received over 22,600 Sudanese seeking refuge and 6,150 Central African returnees. The population at the Korsi site in Central African Republic alone has nearly tripled from 2,300 to 6,370 individuals, requiring UNHCR to scale up efforts to meet the growing needs.

Sahel situation

As of December 2023, Sahel countries hosted about 2.8 million internally displaced persons and over 500,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.

In the Niger, border closures and sanctions have contributed to a deteriorating humanitarian situation. In Mali, as armed conflict intensifies, displacement within and across borders has increased, particularly towards Algeria and Mauritania. With humanitarian access in the country hampered following the non-renewal of the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, UNHCR is adapting its response in the absence of military logistical support.

To the south, Burkina Faso faces heightened internal displacement exacerbated by persistent insecurity and a growing number of people crossing borders towards the Gulf of Guinea – namely Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. According to governments and the local authorities, the estimated number of arrivals from Burkina Faso into the countries of the Gulf of Guinea increased to 88,300 by the end of 2023, with approximately 79 per cent having been registered to date. UNHCR continues to work closely with States on ensuring that access to territory and asylum is granted.

Partly as a consequence of insecurity across the Sahel, forcibly displaced people have increasingly been departing the region in mixed movements. In 2023, the number of arrivals in Italy of people from Burkina Faso, Mali and the Sudan also grew.

Lake Chad Basin situation

Beyond the Sahel, the long-standing humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin remains a major concern. Some 3.6 million people have been displaced, including 3.1 million internally

displaced persons and over 284,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. Conflict, poverty and inequitable access to socioeconomic resources continue to trigger new displacement in Cameroon, Chad, the Niger and north-east Nigeria, and hinder solutions for those in a protracted displacement situation.

Central African Republic situation

Over half a million people are internally displaced in the Central African Republic, and nearly 751,000 Central Africans have sought asylum in neighbouring countries. In late 2023, more than 11,000 Central Africans fled to Chad.

Against this regional backdrop, UNHCR prioritizes ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders and maintains partnerships with development actors to ensure a sustainable response spanning emergency assistance, resilience and self-reliance. This includes community-based interventions, strengthened data collection and analysis as the foundation for an improved protection response, advocacy and the inclusion of forcibly displaced people in development programming. Emphasis will be placed on a route-based approach and preserving access to territory and asylum.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan and updated plans for 2024

Attaining favourable protection environments (protect)

In Côte d'Ivoire, the first national law on asylum was adopted, recognizing biometric identity cards as residence permits. Burkina Faso validated a draft law on internal displacement in accordance with the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) to be presented to the Parliament. UNHCR continues to support ongoing legislative and institutional asylum reforms in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Senegal. In a context characterized by States' legitimate national security concerns, UNHCR will assist them to promote access to territory and asylum, uphold the principle of non-refoulement and advocate for the humanitarian character of asylum.

In July 2023, the President of Senegal signed a decree outlining the composition and functioning of the National Commission for the Management of Refugees and Stateless Persons, established by the 2022 law relating to the status of refugees and the stateless. Burkina Faso, with the Office's support, adopted a civil status strategy and action plan 2023-2027 to enhance access to documentation for internally displaced persons. São Tomé and Príncipe acceded to the two United Nations conventions on statelessness. Côte d'Ivoire and Mali have drafted laws on the status of stateless people awaiting adoption. In 2024, UNHCR will advocate for the adherence of governments and other actors to the Global Alliance to End Statelessness.

UNHCR will support States in operationalizing a route-based approach for mixed movements, reinforcing identification and referral mechanisms and ensuring refugees have access to services along key routes. In Chad, UNHCR collaborated with the local authorities in Tiné to create a "one-stop shop"¹ at the border with the Sudan. Additionally, over 600 students will benefit from scholarships, providing alternatives to risky onward movement. In the Niger, UNHCR will continue supporting local actors in protection monitoring and referral mechanisms in the Agadez region.

The inter-agency initiative on data collection for protection – Project 21 – is being undertaken in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and the Niger. In 2023, its scope expanded to new areas in western Burkina Faso and eastern Chad, as well as in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. Mauritania will be included in 2024. Over 30 partners collected protection data from 2,500 communities through 25,000 interviews. Joint data analysis will contribute to protection response, advocacy and evidenced-based decision-making.

¹ "One-stop shops" are service hubs set up in key locations along the routes to support: (a) the identification of, and referrals to, services; (b) communication with communities on alternatives to risky journeys; and (c) the training of local actors on mixed movements and referral pathways.

Realizing rights in safe environments (respond)

UNHCR scaled up its emergency preparedness and response in the Central African Republic and Chad. To better respond to the protection and assistance needs of people displaced from Burkina Faso to the coastal countries, UNHCR established two new offices in Côte d'Ivoire and one in Ghana.

Contingency plans were developed or updated in Benin, Chad, Liberia, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria. Four national inter-agency multi-risk contingency plans were developed in collaboration with the authorities and partners in Benin and Mali.

In 2024, while focusing on meeting life-saving needs, UNHCR aims to enhance self-reliance and livelihood access from the onset of emergencies. Partnerships with development agencies and local actors will be strengthened.

Regarding community-based protection, more than 400 forcibly displaced families in Mali were trained in digital communication, facilitating information-sharing. In Chad, a digital participatory evaluation system has been implemented to gather data on the needs of displaced people to be integrated into programming.

In addition, UNHCR has increased its engagement with women-led organizations, and this will continue in 2024. In Togo, the *Club des Femmes des Savanes* provided emergency mobile services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, benefitting over 3,000 people. In Chad, collaboration with *La Maison des Femmes* involved a gender equality assessment on protection risks and community capacities, leading to the development of a multi-year strategy on the prevention of gender-based violence.

In eastern Chad, 69,700 refugee children received psychosocial support in child-friendly spaces; among them, 372 unaccompanied and 950 separated children were assisted. One hundred and twelve refugee families were trained to foster children. In the Central African Republic, over 390 refugee children also received psychosocial support. In 2024, UNHCR will strengthen child protection programming, and partnerships with development actors will be enhanced to facilitate the inclusion of refugee children in their programmes.

Financial constraints have hindered the Office's capacity to respond to growing needs related to the prevention of, and response to, gender-based violence. Between 2022 and 2023, the percentage of women and girls without access to services related to the prevention of, and response to, gender-based violence increased from 26 to 28 per cent. In 2024, focus on the prevention of gender-based violence will continue, including through the implementation of an initiative on engaging men through accountable practice. Pilot projects will be supported.

In eastern Chad, in collaboration with partners, over 274,000 medical consultations were conducted, and 217,000 children were screened for malnutrition. In Cameroon, enrolment in the national universal health coverage scheme began, with nearly 47,100 refugees enrolled by the end of the year. UNHCR will continue to advocate and strengthen collaboration with the national authorities and partners for sustainable refugee access to health care.

Empowering communities and achieve gender equality (empower)

As of September 2023, over 13,200 schools were closed across the region due to insecurity. Access to education is hampered by limited infrastructure and a shortage of teachers. In 2023, UNHCR supported 263,000 refugee children; some 230 classroom and water and sanitation facilities were built or rehabilitated in 240 schools, and more than 96,700 school kits were distributed. Over 3,400 teachers were also trained, and 1,150 refugee youth benefitted from higher education scholarships. Cash assistance for education surged by 295 per cent, reaching 47,100 people. In 2024, UNHCR will continue to advocate for the inclusion of forcibly displaced children and adolescents in national plans and budgets.

In 2023, UNHCR further strengthened livelihood initiatives by engaging with governments, development actors and the private sector in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Niger and Nigeria. The Office did so with a view to complementing the operationalization of the global collaboration framework of the United Nations Development Programme and UNHCR. Of particular note in the region was the integration of the UNHCR livelihood strategy into Burkina Faso's national development plan.

In 2024, focus will be on a multi-partner “graduation approach”, a poverty alleviation model, which is tailored to a household’s socioeconomic conditions. Spreading assistance over 36 months, it facilitates refugee inclusion in development initiatives.

In 2023, the UNHCR and World Bank Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement approved two projects in the region – “Burkina Faso Socio-Economic Module for Protection Monitoring” and “Cameroon Statistical Inclusion of Forcibly Displaced Persons in the Census” – to enhance collection of data that helps foster inclusion in national development plans. UNHCR will strengthen its collaboration with the International Finance Corporation through an energy and agribusiness project in Chad. A joint project, in collaboration with the Joint Data Center and the World Bank, for the statistical inclusion of the forcibly displaced in an upcoming poverty assessment in Mali, will undergo review in early 2024.

In Chad, some 4,860 South Sudanese refugees (1,480 households) in urban areas received multipurpose cash transfers to help meet basic needs. Ivorians who chose to locally integrate in Ghana were also provided with cash support while awaiting the finalization of the documentation process. In Benin, through joint programming, UNHCR and partners distributed cash assistance to approximately 4,120 Burkinabe refugee households, exceeding the original target of 2,700 households. In Burkina Faso, due to the national suspension of cash transfers, UNHCR reduced the scope of cash assistance to focus on education and livelihoods and channelled resources to in-kind distributions. The Office continues to advocate for the resumption of cash transfers.

UNHCR is enhancing its ability to readily provide cash assistance from the onset of an emergency by prioritizing digitalized transfer mechanisms to further financial inclusion and by establishing joint cash-based assistance mechanisms with other partners.

Securing solutions (solve)

In July 2023, Senegal pledged to facilitate the naturalization of 9,000 Mauritanian refugees who opted for local integration. The authorities in Côte d’Ivoire undertook a mission to Liberia in December 2023 to facilitate access to permanent residency of over 400 former Ivorian refugees. In 2024, UNHCR will advocate for local solutions for Mauritians in Mali, Senegalese in the Gambia, Togolese in Ghana, and Ghanaians in Togo.

In 2023, UNHCR supported the voluntary repatriation of over 4,000 Central Africans, mainly from Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Additionally, 7,300 Cameroonians voluntarily repatriated from Chad. They received cash assistance and reintegration support, and in Cameroon, peaceful coexistence initiatives were undertaken in Logone-Birmi.

In 2024, upholding the principles of return in safety and dignity, UNHCR will continue to advocate for the finalization of tripartite legal frameworks for voluntary repatriation in the Lake Chad Basin region, as well as between the Central African Republic and neighbouring countries.

In 2023, 3,120 refugees were resettled, and the cases of 4,100 refugees were submitted against a regional quota of 3,260 resettlement spaces. Despite a 135 per cent increase in submissions between 2021 and 2023, there was an 18 per cent decrease in the overall resettlement quota in the same period. In 2024, the resettlement quota for the emergency transit mechanism in the Niger has decreased by 31 per cent.

A fraud prevention and response campaign ended in August 2023, having reached over 167,000 people. Regional integrity priorities in 2024 continue to focus on strengthening the availability and quality of data related to fraud committed by forcibly displaced and stateless people, to better target prevention and response activities.

In the framework of complementary pathways, including labour mobility schemes, private sponsorships and family reunification, 48 people departed to Canada, France, Germany, Italy and the United States. Strengthened data collection for specific complementary pathways is essential to assess the programme’s opportunities for growth.

The Central African Republic Solutions Support Platform was launched in October 2023. The Platform’s Core Group, led by the African Development Bank (AfDB), is responsible for mobilizing financial and technical support. A regional roadmap was developed to guide programmatic areas. Signatory governments have committed to improving access to rights,

enhancing social services in areas of return and promoting employment. It is foreseen that this will help create an enabling environment for the sustainable return and reintegration of nearly 300,000 refugees who are expected to voluntarily repatriate between 2024 and 2027.

In the Niger, a national strategy for durable solutions was developed with key stakeholders, including the forcibly displaced and donors. The strategy is under review by the authorities. With the support of UNHCR, the first poverty assessment to include internally displaced persons was carried out in the Central African Republic. The data will aid the national authorities and development actors in designing programmes that foster solutions.

In 2023, UNHCR contributed to the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement and supported States and internally displaced communities, particularly in the Central African Republic, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria. These four countries are among the 15 countries under the Action Agenda where solution pathways will be developed in the next two years.

Cross-cutting issues

In 2024, UNHCR will implement a new regional strategy for climate action to protect forcibly displaced people in climate vulnerable areas such as in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad and the Niger. In collaboration with the Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry, also known by its acronym CIFOR-ICRAF, UNHCR in Cameroon is implementing climate adaptation measures, including reforestation and climate-smart agriculture and sustainable shelter construction. A preliminary environmental impact assessment was also conducted for five new settlements in eastern Chad to identify and mitigate environmental issues.

Through the Office’s sustained engagement and advocacy, the World Bank has enhanced the effectiveness of the Windows for Host Communities and Refugees portfolio in Chad, identifying new areas of investment in livelihoods, energy, social protection and institutional capacity-building. The Windows for Host Communities and Refugees eligibility process is ongoing in Togo. In Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad and the Niger, UNHCR is collaborating with the AfDB and other partners to enhance coordination on stabilization, social cohesion, inclusive education and infrastructure.

In 2024, UNHCR will continue to partner with the private sector, development banks and development actors to promote livelihood opportunities and self-reliance among forcibly displaced people and their host communities. UNHCR will also support the operationalization of pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023.

The renewed memorandum of understanding with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) includes elements related to mixed movements and solutions aiming to enhance common approaches and responses in the region. UNHCR is also providing the Economic Community of Central African States and ECOWAS with technical support in drafting policies and model laws on refugees.

C. Financial information

The 2024 financial requirements for the West and Central Africa region stood at \$1,115.1 million, of which 11 per cent has been funded as of 31 January 2024, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

The overall needs in 2024 include \$456.4 million under impact area, “respond: realizing rights in safe environments”; \$336.0 million under impact area, “protect: attaining favourable protection environments”; \$203.4 million under impact area, “empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality”, and \$119.3 million under impact area, “solve: securing solutions”.