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Update on UNHCR operations in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

By the end of 2024, the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted some 5.6 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 20.7¹ million internally displaced persons, totalling 26.3 million people, an increase of 1.8 million persons since 2023. Most refugees and asylum-seekers were hosted in Uganda (1.8 million), Ethiopia (1.1 million), the Sudan (838,000) and Kenya (824,000). The internally displaced were mainly in the Sudan (11.6 million), Somalia (3.9 million), Ethiopia (3.3 million), South Sudan (1.8 million) and Burundi (86,000).

The Sudan situation

The conflict in the Sudan that broke out in Khartoum in April 2023, deepened throughout 2024, forcibly displacing over 12 million people. By the end of 2024, 3.3 million refugees and refugee returnees had crossed into the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan and Uganda. Another 8.8 million people were newly displaced inside the country, adding to forced displacements that had occurred prior to April 2023.

The conflict has been characterized by sexual violence, arbitrary killings and the targeted persecution of ethnic groups. The delivery of humanitarian aid, particularly in areas experiencing severe hunger, remains a major challenge due to ongoing insecurity and limited accessibility. Together with its partners, UNHCR will lead and coordinate the response through the [Regional Refugee Response Plan](#) for 2025. This plan caters to both immediate emergency needs, and longer-term solutions aimed at building resilience and integrating refugees into national systems.

This is currently the largest internal displacement situation in the world, and one of the fastest-growing displacement crises overall. Sudanese refugees and asylum-seekers constitute the largest displaced population outside their home country in Africa.

South Sudan situation

Conflict, extreme weather events and disasters, inter-communal strife, and severe socioeconomic pressures continue to displace thousands in South Sudan, driving ongoing refugee outflows. The majority have sought asylum in Uganda, where 30,786 new arrivals were received in 2024, while others remain internally displaced.

Approximately 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees are hosted in neighbouring countries, including nearly 1 million in Uganda, 613,000 in the Sudan, 429,000 in Ethiopia and 193,000 in Kenya. More than 1 million people have arrived in South Sudan from the Sudan since the conflict began. More than two thirds are South Sudanese, and many have never lived in the country before. They represent a 9 per

¹ The Government of Ethiopia determined the number of internally displaced persons to be 3.3 million, based on data from the thirty-sixth round of the displacement tracking matrix conducted in May 2024.

cent increase in South Sudan's total population, exacerbating socioeconomic challenges.

In 2025, the region is expected to continue accommodating a significant number of South Sudanese refugees as the country navigates economic challenges and political developments. The Government has announced a revised timeline for the presidential elections, originally scheduled for 2024, extending them by two years, which has contributed to an evolving political landscape. South Sudanese refugees will continue to require protection and legal assistance, access to essential services, education, and durable solutions.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo situation

In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, armed conflicts in North Kivu and the Western provinces continue to displace populations into Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Together, these countries hosted over 804,900 Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers by the end of 2024. In January of 2025, fighting intensified in North Kivu, causing additional displacements alongside severe human rights abuses and gender-based violence.

The region is expected to continue hosting a substantial number of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Reception and life-saving assistance; community-based protection; protection monitoring, analysis and reporting; health; education; and livelihoods will remain key priorities in countries of asylum.

Somalia situation

The situation facing internally displaced persons in Somalia remains complex, exacerbated by conflict, environmental challenges, weak social protection systems, and socioeconomic instability. In 2024, approximately 3.9 million individuals were displaced due to ongoing internal violence and recurring natural disasters. Somalia also hosts around 30,000 refugees, primarily from Ethiopia and Yemen. In addition, more than 900,000 Somali refugees remain in the region, with 468,000 hosted in Kenya, 362,000 in Ethiopia and 51,000 in Uganda.

In 2025, UNHCR will prioritize emergency response to new displacements, while also pursuing solutions for protracted internally displaced populations, in line with the recently launched [National Solutions Pathways Action Plan](#). UNHCR will continue advocating increased development and climate financing to address the drivers of displacement, enhance resilience and mitigate the risk of future crises.

Burundi situation

At the twenty-ninth meeting of the Tripartite Commission, held in December 2024 with UNHCR and the Burundian and Tanzanian Governments, it was decided to continue promoting returns in 2025 and conduct comprehensive protection and solutions assessments for Burundian refugees.

In 2024, over 20,000 individuals were assisted to return. Rising inflation drove up the cost of basic commodities, reducing the purchasing power of cash assistance provided to returnees. In 2025, efforts will focus on ensuring legal, physical, and material safety for returnees while promoting sustainable reintegration.

Flooding

In 2024, heavy rains triggered by the El Niño weather pattern affected over 2.8 million people across Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, and Uganda. Thousands were displaced within their countries, with both refugees and internally displaced persons impacted. In response, UNHCR and its partners provided life-saving assistance and protection.

In 2025, UNHCR will continue prioritizing emergency response and recovery efforts, while also strengthening resilience-building initiatives to support long-term stability.

Mixed movements

The region is characterized by complex population movement patterns, with displaced persons moving through the East and Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, across the central Mediterranean to Europe, and into Southern Africa.

In line with its “route-based approach”, UNHCR, in collaboration with States, the East African Community, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, civil society, refugee-led organizations and other regional stakeholders, will prioritize enhancing coordination; strengthening monitoring mechanisms; improving asylum systems; and expanding access to services, complementary pathways and safe and dignified return options along movement routes. Additionally, UNHCR will focus on providing accurate, up-to-date, and reliable information to persons on the move and addressing the underlying drivers of onward movements.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2024 and updated plans for 2025

Attaining favourable protection environments

While territorial access is generally unrestricted within the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, some countries have imposed inconsistent access to national asylum procedures – either for specific profiles or by suspending asylum access for certain nationalities. As a result, unregistered and undocumented asylum-seekers are more vulnerable to refoulement and are excluded from legal protection and essential services, including education and healthcare. Delays in national asylum procedures, coupled with reluctance in some countries to grant refugee status on a prima facie basis, have led to a backlog of more than 455,000 registered asylum-seekers awaiting decisions. This has significantly impacted the availability of rights, inclusion in national systems and pathways for solutions.

UNHCR will continue to support States and collaborate with regional entities such as the East African Community and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development to adopt and implement harmonized policies that enhance refugee protection and inclusion across the region.

Preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse and supporting child protection

In 2025, UNHCR will monitor the implementation of gender-based violence policies to enhance prevention, risk mitigation and response efforts. Inter-agency coordination will be strengthened to ensure accountability to women and girls. Safe and effective data collection will be supported by the inter-agency rollout of the gender-based violence information management system, known as GBVIMS+. UNHCR will also scale up impact-driven programmes by increasing direct partnerships with women-led organizations, including those led by forcibly displaced women.

UNHCR will prioritize the implementation of its child protection policy, with a focus on strengthening the inclusion of displaced children in national protection systems. This will ensure greater integration of refugee children into national programmes and strengthen the capacity of national child protection actors in case management, particularly in applying best interest principles, conducting family tracing and facilitating reunification efforts. Vulnerable and at-risk children will receive specialized targeted child protection services, to ensure their safety and well-being.

Promoting protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

For the 20.7 million internally displaced persons, UNHCR will focus on delivering protection services, conducting protection monitoring and providing partners with protection analyses to guide their support for internally displaced persons, and other life-saving interventions. Concurrently, UNHCR will contribute to the pursuit of

durable solutions, in line with the [Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#).

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

Providing cash and multisectoral assistance

In 2024, approximately 800,000 individuals received cash grants, representing a disbursement of 5 per cent of available funds, a 1 per cent increase from 2023. Of these recipients, approximately 80 per cent were refugees, 15 per cent internally displaced persons, 4 per cent returnees and less than 1 per cent were from host communities. Overall, 56 per cent of all recipients were female. Approximately 54 per cent of cash transfers were made through banks and mobile transactions. Post-distribution monitoring revealed that 84 per cent of households were satisfied with cash assistance. Additionally, 89 per cent of recipients were able to purchase necessary items in local markets, with food being the most bought item, followed by hygiene products and cooking fuel.

In 2025, UNHCR aims to expend 10 per cent of available funds on cash assistance, including in its emergency responses. Efforts will focus on expanding the digitalization of transactions to promote financial inclusion and increase opportunities for women to become direct recipients of cash assistance.

Addressing food security

In 2024, refugees across the region continued to face severe food insecurity, with food ration cuts ranging from 30 per cent to 70 per cent of the recommended daily intake. Acute malnutrition levels remained critically high in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and the Sudan, further exacerbated by the impact of the ongoing conflict in the Sudan.

In Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda, UNHCR and the World Food Programme implemented a differentiated food assistance approach based on vulnerability levels, with plans to expand this model to Kenya in 2025. Moving forward, UNHCR and the World Food Programme will promote greater refugee self-reliance through targeted partnerships, while engaging with development actors to enhance livelihood opportunities and reduce dependence on humanitarian food assistance.

Advancing Solutions

The Global Compact on Refugees and the second Global Refugee Forum

The implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees is progressing, driven by transformative government commitments. Kenya's Shirika Plan, an initiative to transform refugee camps into municipalities, is moving forward. In Ethiopia, key advancements include the "Makatet" roadmap which aims to enable Global Refugee Forum pledge-matching; include refugees into the national identification document system; promote economic inclusion through the new Right to Work Directive; and implement the "solutions from the start" approach.² Uganda continues to lead efforts to transition services into its national systems, while Rwanda's commitment to including refugees in health insurance and promoting self-reliance initiatives aligns with its strategy to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements.

Fully realizing government pledges requires sustained partner support. For example, Denmark, Germany and Japan have backed Kenya and Ethiopia's initiatives, while the European Union's support for "solutions from the start" and integrated settlement approaches, alongside World Bank investments across the region, demonstrate the catalytic impact of matched contributions. With the High-Level Officials Meeting approaching in December 2025, accelerated matching support will be essential to realizing these commitments.

² This approach involves embedding durable solutions—such as voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement—into emergency preparedness and response activities from the onset of a crisis.

Expanding development partnerships

Development partners, including the African Development Bank, the European Union, and the World Bank, among others, are providing financial support at both regional and national levels to facilitate the matching and implementation of refugee-hosting countries' Global Refugee Forum pledges on inclusion. In 2025, UNHCR will strengthen collaboration with development partners, including the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and regional banks, to enhance resilience and sustainable development for both refugees and host communities.

Livelihoods

While UNHCR continues to foster greater self-reliance, high unemployment rates and unfavourable legal frameworks in some countries have resulted in a low cumulative regional employment rate among forcibly displaced and stateless persons. This rate stood at 30 per cent at the end of 2024. Barriers include difficulties in obtaining work permits, administrative restrictions and limited job availability in host countries.

In 2025, partnerships with the private sector, development actors and international financial institutions will be critical in expanding employment and livelihood opportunities. IFC and UNHCR continue to collaborate in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, including through the “Partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced persons and host communities” (PROSPECTS).³ Through strengthened collaboration with the African Development Bank, efforts are being made to address barriers to private sector investment in refugee-hosting and return areas, driving economic inclusion and sustainable development. A landmark moment in 2024 was the inclusion of forced displacement at the Africa Investment Forum, signalling a pivotal shift in positioning refugee-hosting areas as frontier markets for investments, particularly in renewable energy, agribusiness, and financial services.

Health

In 2024, the region faced multiple health emergencies, including cholera, dengue fever, Marburg virus disease, measles and mpox, which strained national health systems. These challenges were further exacerbated by extreme weather conditions and the ongoing conflict in the Sudan, which placed additional pressure on neighbouring countries' health infrastructure. Refugees, particularly those in urban areas, continued to encounter financial barriers to accessing primary health care services. In 2025, focus will be placed on pursuing more sustainable responses by strengthening inclusion in national health systems while maintaining rapid epidemic response capacities.

Education

In 2024, the region hosted 2 million refugee children of school-going age with only 39 per cent enrolled in school – marking a 10 per cent decrease from 49 per cent in 2023. Less than half of those enrolled were female, with the proportion of girls declining sharply at higher levels of education. Notably, while 77 per cent of refugee girls were enrolled in primary school, this figure dropped to 34 per cent in secondary school, and just 1 per cent in tertiary education.

Access to secondary education remains a significant challenge for both boys and girls. Even in countries with high primary enrolment rates, progression to secondary education dropped significantly. In Uganda, for example, the rate of primary enrolment dropped from 96 per cent to 88 per cent, while enrolment in secondary education remained low, at 9 per cent, effectively reducing the number of refugees

³ The project is implemented by UNHCR, IFC, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Bank. It operates at global and regional level and focuses on eight countries in the Middle East and North Africa and in the East and Horn of Africa.

eligible for tertiary education and, consequently, limiting their future livelihood opportunities.

Progress towards refugee inclusion in national education systems continued in both policy and practice. In Rwanda, the Government has integrated 80 per cent of refugee schools into the national system. This includes the absorption of costs for national teachers. In Burundi, a costed strategy was finalized to guide the inclusion of refugees and the reintegration of returnees into the national education system, with significant transition costs covered by development partners. In Ethiopia and South Sudan, efforts to implement the “solutions from the start” approach resulted in the expansion of public schools, enabling refugee children to enrol immediately upon displacement, with language and curriculum support provided.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development issued the Regional Qualifications Framework, establishing standards for the recognition of prior learning and facilitating educational and labour mobility among member States.

In 2025, UNHCR will focus on expanding equitable access to public education in both emergency and protracted settings. Where inclusion in national systems is not feasible, efforts will prioritize ensuring continued access to safe learning environments.

Durable solutions

In 2024, approximately 445,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin, primarily to Burundi and South Sudan, with smaller numbers returning to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia and the Sudan. South Sudan continues to struggle with the recent influx of returnees from the Sudan, with many still housed in temporary transit centres. In Burundi, reintegration efforts will require greater support in 2025, particularly from development actors, as the country faces an economic crisis exacerbated by high inflation and limited livelihood opportunities. UNHCR will continue seeking support to implement a resilience-oriented, area-based approach in high-return areas.

In 2024, UNHCR submitted 33,981 cases for resettlement, with 29,336 refugees successfully resettled – a new record, surpassing 27,993 departures in 2023. Additionally, refugees benefited from private sponsorship, family reunification, employment, education opportunities and other pathways for admission. However, for 2025, some resettlement countries have suspended their programmes or reduced their quotas, both regionally and globally, decreasing third-country solutions for refugees. Nevertheless, protection referrals and needs assessments will remain a priority, ensuring resettlement opportunities are allocated to those facing the greatest protection risks.

Eradicating statelessness

In 2024, South Sudan acceded to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, fulfilling the pledge it made at the second Global Refugee Forum.

In 2025, States will receive support to implement key commitments made at a regional statelessness meeting held in 2024. The meeting assessed progress after African Union member States adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa. Additionally, targeted awareness-raising initiatives will reinforce collaborative strategies and support the eradication of statelessness, focusing on engaging local communities, civil society, and policymakers to address the root causes of statelessness, combat discrimination, and advocate inclusive nationality laws.

Risk management

Operations have improved their risk registers to support risk-based decision-making. In 2024, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Sudan assessed the balance between risk tolerance

and achieving results, while awareness-raising sessions on aid diversion risks were conducted in Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan and within the regional risk network. Somalia developed a fraud and corruption strategy and action plan, bringing the total number of operations with such frameworks to six. Assessments were carried out on self-organized returns from the Sudan to Ethiopia and on the risks posed by extreme weather events in Ethiopia.

Observations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services indicate that risk management is not fully integrated into processes across some operations. In 2025, efforts will focus on strengthening oversight and capacity-building, particularly in the implementation of risk treatments. Uganda will receive support to develop a fraud and corruption strategy and action plan, while risk management training for partners and climate risk analyses in Burundi, Kenya and South Sudan will also be conducted.

C. Financial information

In October 2024, the Executive Committee approved the 2025 budget of \$2,167.1 million for the region. The region's budget now stands at \$2,184.7 million, owing to the establishment of a supplementary budget for the Sudan situation. The breakdown of requirements by impact area for 2025 is as follows: "respond: realizing rights in safe environments", \$1,103.4 million; "protect: attaining favourable protection environments", \$541.4 million; "empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality", \$337.2 million; and "solve: securing solutions", \$202.7 million.

As of 31 January 2025, the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region was 9 per cent funded, with \$198 million in voluntary contributions recorded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of flexible funding.

In 2025, UNHCR will continue to explore alternative sources of funding, including from development and private partners, to address the immense needs in the region.