

## **Update on UNHCR operations in Southern Africa**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

At the end of 2024, the southern Africa region hosted 9.7 million forcibly displaced persons including refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and returnees. The region continued to face multiple humanitarian challenges, including ongoing conflicts, disasters induced by extreme weather events, persistent drought, health emergencies, and changing asylum landscapes.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to grapple with persistent insecurity, leading to significant internal displacement. The number of internally displaced persons reached seven million at the end of 2024, the highest figure ever recorded for the country, primarily in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri. The situation poses a serious challenge for host communities, who are already struggling with the impact of poverty, cholera and the mpox epidemic. In January 2025, escalation of conflict in North Kivu Province resulted in new internal displacement of over half a million people, particularly in and around Goma.

In December 2024, Tropical Cyclone Chido affected several countries, including the Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique, causing widespread displacement and worsening the existing vulnerabilities of displaced populations. In northern Mozambique, UNHCR undertook pre-emptive measures such as training local disaster management committees to identify people with specific protection needs and provided relief items to over 2,600 individuals in the evacuation centre in Pemba within the first 48 hours of the cyclone. Moreover, in Mozambique, post-election violence displaced thousands, with over 8,000 individuals seeking asylum in Eswatini and Malawi. Both countries generously kept their borders open to those seeking safety from the violence and led the response, demonstrating strong national ownership, with the continued support of UNHCR.

The convergence of forced displacement and vulnerability caused by extreme weather events is expected to continue across the region in 2025 and create acute challenges for many countries that face risks from both sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset environmental degradation. The region's exposure to climate shocks is particularly concerning, given that many refugees and internally displaced persons live in settlements located in areas highly susceptible to flooding, drought, and extreme weather events, while having limited access to adaptive resilience mechanisms.

An increase in mixed movements of refugees and migrants was observed along the southern and Indian Ocean routes during 2024.<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, together with partners, developed a regional strategy for the period 2024 to 2027 to address mixed movements. It aims to provide safe access to territory, strengthen asylum systems, and enhance protection measures along the southern and Indian Ocean routes. In 2025, UNHCR will continue to collaborate with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and its member States to implement comprehensive strategies addressing both conflict-induced and disaster-induced displacement.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on mixed movements of refugees and asylum-seekers in Southern Africa is available on the UNHCR operational data portal: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113472>

Notwithstanding the considerable challenges, the southern Africa region presents unique opportunities to address forced displacement by advancing inclusion, promoting sustainable responses and scaling up development investment. This is the case in Zambia, where the Government, through its National Refugee Policy Implementation Plan, is strengthening refugee inclusion, with the aim to transform refugee settlements into economic hubs, and to enable refugees access and contribution to markets. Steady progress to include refugees in national systems was made in several countries, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. As the region prepares for the High-Level Officials Meeting to be held in December 2025, implementing the commitments made under the relevant multi-stakeholder pledges at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023 will contribute to enhancing sustainable responses in the region. In this context, countries in the region have made notable progress in developing durable solutions for forcibly displaced populations with the aim to enhance their self-reliance and stabilization by promoting economic inclusion, providing vocational training, supporting agricultural productivity, and integrating refugees into local communities through education, health services, and livelihood programmes. It will remain a key consideration in 2025, in line with their respective national objectives and in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. UNHCR will continue to be an integral part of the United Nations collective efforts in South Africa while the country holds the G20 Presidency from December 2024 to November 2025.

Moreover, the region remains committed to advancing the 2030 Agenda. For instance, through the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund, forcibly displaced people in Malawi will gain access to clean and renewable energy technologies for cooking and lighting.

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

### *Attaining favourable protection environments (protect)*

In December 2024, a meeting was held with SADC countries on operationalizing the route-based approach to build consensus on a coordinated and holistic response to mixed movements in the region. Key recommendations included prioritizing multipurpose hubs in strategic locations for 2025, in line with the regional strategy for the route-based approach endorsed in July 2024. To underpin mixed movement flows with comprehensive, disaggregated, and standardized data, UNHCR piloted the regional mixed movement data platform for southern Africa in Malawi and South Africa, with plans to expand to other countries in 2025.

Of the 16 countries that have ratified the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, only 13 have ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and nine have ratified the 2009 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. A regional roundtable held in December 2024 to mark the 15th anniversary of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa resulted in new commitments from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique, to integrate the Convention into their respective national legislations. Continued engagement with the Republic of the Congo led to the adoption of a national law on internally displaced persons in September 2024.

In 2024, Botswana, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe undertook reviews of their refugee laws, with some still in progress, to steadily enhance the inclusion of refugee rights in their respective national legislations, while Madagascar was supported by UNHCR in drafting its asylum law. The Government of Zambia approved a transformative national refugee policy, integrating refugees into national plans, turning settlements into economic hubs, and improving access to local markets. The resumption of refugee registration in Angola after an eight-year hiatus facilitated the registration of over 7,000 families. In Zimbabwe, refugees can now receive national identity documents, similar to those of nationals, including birth certificates and identity cards. Training on mixed movements and international refugee law were conducted by UNHCR in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia to enhance the institutional capacity of the Governments to protect forcibly displaced populations.

UNHCR partnered with the African Risk Capacity Group, a specialized agency of the African Union, on a pioneering programme which provides insurance coverage to vulnerable communities affected by climate shocks. For the first time, 2,400 refugee households in Dzaleka camp alongside 1,600 host community families in Dowa District in Malawi were included in the insurance coverage and received compensation. The programme showcased the potential of parametric insurance in humanitarian practice for refugees. UNHCR will make efforts to expand this model across the region.

*Realizing rights in safe environments (respond)*

Although refugees and asylum-seekers enjoyed access to basic services in the region, they also faced challenges related to El-Niño conditions such as drought, cyclones and storms. To address the pressing issues of fragility, forced displacement and the resilience of populations in displacement settings prone to environmental degradation, a strategic tripartite partnership between SADC, the African Development Bank, and UNHCR was initiated in 2023. The partnership applies a regional nexus approach to mitigate fragility risks, manage disasters effectively, respond to related challenges, and adapt approaches for resilience-building. In 2024, a key outcome of this unique partnership is the SADC-led joint regional programme, endorsed by the SADC Ministerial Committee of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation and the Committee of SADC Ministers Responsible for Disaster Risk Management, reinforcing regional ownership. The programme aims to integrate forced displacement and refugee issues into national policies, strategies, and practices,

Zambia continued its efforts to strengthen resilience, inclusion, and economic stability for forcibly displaced populations and host communities. Following the country's declaration of drought as a national disaster and emergency in 2024, several measures are being taken to address vulnerabilities linked to environmental factors and strengthen resilience such as supporting refugee inclusion in the national digital identity system, promoting climate-resilient infrastructure as well as agriculture-based economic opportunities. For instance, with the support of the World Bank's financing mechanism "Window for Host Communities and Refugees", efforts are being made to improve access to socioeconomic opportunities for refugees and their host communities within and around the Meheba refugee settlement.

The Nexus Norte project (2022–2024) in collaboration with a development partner, bridges humanitarian and development efforts to address the needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, and host communities in northern Mozambique. During this period, some 22,300 internally displaced persons and host community members obtained civil identification documents. Over 1,660 youth gained access to technical and vocational education and training, while some 540 people were able to initiate or expand small businesses. Moreover, 26,000 people were able to participate in social cohesion programmes, and 1,000 survivors of gender-based violence documented their cases and were able to access support, with 86 per cent receiving psychosocial assistance. Mozambique also advanced a people-centred approach which includes forcibly displaced populations to address environmental challenges. Following its commitment at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023 to transition the Maratane refugee settlement into a green, climate-resilient, locally integrated village, UNHCR is supporting the country's effort, aiming to create a blueprint for area-based refugee solutions.

The local integration of refugees and former refugees in Meheba and Mayukwayukwa refugee settlements in Zambia is being undertaken through area-based development plans with the support of a development partner and in collaboration with UNHCR. In addition, the ongoing Japan HOPE programme (2022–2025) and initiatives like a learning exchange with Uganda exemplify the collaboration with development partners in advancing sustainable responses. UNHCR is collaborating with a leading financial services provider in Africa to enhance refugee inclusion in the region. Partnership with the private sector is also enhancing access of displaced people and host communities to basic services. For instance, UNHCR's three-year collaboration with a private corporation has resulted in improved access to health care, clean water, sanitation, and resilience for over 230,000 people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Malawi.

Of the 214 pledges made by States and other stakeholders in the southern Africa region at the Global Refugee Forums held in 2019 and 2023, nearly half are at various stages of implementation. Self-reliance of refugees is being fostered through the cultivation of 125 hectares of agricultural land allocated to them in Zimbabwe. Pledges made to address statelessness have achieved some milestones including the adoption of national action plans to eradicate statelessness in the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini and Zambia. Nationality laws are being amended in Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia to facilitate access to nationality for children born in the territory (Lesotho), conferral of citizenship to stateless persons (Namibia) and to facilitate provision of dual citizenship, registration and citizenship of foundlings until the age of 7 years as citizens (Botswana).

Efforts to include refugees and stateless populations in national data initiatives were undertaken in the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Activities included the multiple indicator cluster survey in Zimbabwe, the household living conditions survey in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the joint assessment mission in the Republic of the Congo, forced displacement survey initiation in Zambia and the demographic and health survey in Malawi. In 2025, collaboration between UNHCR and national statistical offices will be institutionalized, strengthening coordination with regional economic communities, and leveraging digital tools and artificial intelligence for enhanced data analysis and protection solutions.

#### *Empowering communities and achieving gender equality (empower)*

Efforts were made for refugees to access affordable financial services, a crucial step to achieve economic self-reliance. Financial inclusion for forcibly displaced persons was advanced through the collaboration with the Alliance for Financial Inclusion, a global network of central banks and financial service providers. Refugees in Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia are now included in national financial inclusion strategies, with progress underway in Zimbabwe.

Agriculture remains a key sector for livelihoods in the region. In Zimbabwe, UNHCR in collaboration with the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development and private sector partners supports agro-based enterprises in Tongogara refugee settlement, benefiting 500 households. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 100 hectares were made available for returnees and host communities to boost food security and self-reliance. In Zambia, where a severe drought in 2024 caused widespread destruction of crops, UNHCR will focus on value chains and market systems to create sustainable agribusinesses for refugees to boost their income.

Education and literacy are central to the efforts of UNHCR to integrate refugees into national education systems across southern Africa. However, the gross enrolment rates for refugees and asylum-seekers in primary, secondary and higher education in the region remain below the global average. Addressing these gaps remains a priority for UNHCR. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, efforts were made to transition 352 teachers to the Ministry of Education payroll. In Malawi, 44 additional government teachers were deployed to refugee-hosting schools in Dzaleka camp to enhance the quality of education. In Mozambique, the Instant Network Schools programme has transformed classrooms into multimedia learning hubs, benefiting over 60,000 refugee and Mozambican learners. UNHCR plans to leverage the Inclusion Support Program for Refugee Education, a global multi-stakeholder initiative, to enhance the capacity of host countries to include refugees in their national education systems. Interventions will focus on enhancing education delivery in emergency situations and developing capacity of teachers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia. Strategic partnerships are also being strengthened to expand access to tertiary education, particularly in South Africa.

The United Nations Children's Fund and UNHCR collaborate to protect children on the move by strengthening child protection systems, promoting alternative care, and providing mental health support. Key initiatives include cross-border case management, strengthening the role of national child protection authorities, advocating for resource allocations through social work costing, and advancing information management for case management through interagency platforms like the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

In 2024, UNHCR partnered with six refugee women-led organizations to address gender-based violence and enhance gender equality. In Malawi, to enable financial independence and food security, Women for Action empowers marginalized women with the knowledge of aquaponics, a unique farming method, and through the provision of information and communications technology trainings. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, local women's groups have been instrumental in increasing women leadership by 35 per cent, providing life-saving support to women and girls at risk. These initiatives highlight refugee women as leaders and changemakers, forging sustainable, community-driven solutions. In 2025, UNHCR will prioritize localization, supporting community-led initiatives and aim for 50 per cent representation of women in refugee community structures.

The region faced multiple outbreaks of diseases, including mpox and cholera during 2024. Coordinated efforts between UNHCR, governments and partners were made to address the spread of diseases in refugee camps and settlements and helped prevent deaths. In 2025, epidemic preparedness, response in displacement settings, and integration of refugees into national health systems will remain key priorities.

#### *Securing solutions (solve)*

UNHCR continues to work towards implementing durable solutions for displaced populations in southern Africa, including through efforts to expand complementary pathways.

In 2024, UNHCR submitted cases of over 6,300 refugees for resettlement, primarily to Australia, Canada and the United States of America and 5,600 people were supported to depart, representing an increase of 56 per cent compared to 2023.

Over 13,900 refugees were assisted to voluntarily return to Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. Overall, insecurity hindered returns to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while heavy rains impeded returns from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to Burundi. Returnees were assisted with access to education, shelter and healthcare to ensure their reintegration. In 2025, UNHCR will strengthen return assistance programmes by leveraging the skills of returning communities as well as the skills of receiving communities to make return sustainable.

In Angola, 4,200 former refugees from Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone were locally integrated and received two-year residence permits. UNHCR will continue to support naturalization processes, inclusion in national social protection systems, and access to alternative legal statuses as part of improving access to local solutions.

Some 70 refugees benefited from complementary pathways such as scholarships, family reunification, and labour mobility programmes in 2024. The resumption by Malawi and Zimbabwe to issue machine-readable Convention Travel Documents allowed refugees to pursue education and labour opportunities elsewhere. In 2025, UNHCR will make efforts to expand labour pathways based on the skills of refugees.

During 2024, an estimated 1.6 million internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo returned to their places of origin despite a challenging security situation. The nexus approach<sup>2</sup>, piloted in three provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri by the Government and United Nations agencies, contributed to expanding development. In Tanganyika Province, reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts, in conjunction with multisectoral programming, resulted in the return of 241,000 displaced people. In Mozambique, over 5,000 internally displaced persons returned to Cabo Delgado Province despite security concerns and lack of infrastructure and housing.

Efforts to eradicate statelessness included the endorsement by the Pan-African Parliament, the legislative body of the African Union, of a model law on the right to nationality and the eradication of statelessness. Developed with the support of UNHCR, the model law aims to harmonize citizenship laws and prevent statelessness. UNHCR and SADC took stock of the implementation of commitments to eradicate statelessness through the #IBelong campaign to

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please refer to the country brief on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus for 2024.

end statelessness and twelve key recommendations were adopted to accelerate legal reform, enhance data collection and strengthen national action plans. Zambia became the first SADC country to join the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, setting a regional precedent, in addition to the Pan-African Parliament's membership.

### **C. Financial information**

In October 2024, the Executive Committee approved the 2025 budget of \$451.3 million for the southern Africa region. This number represents a decrease of \$40.9 million compared to the initial 2024 budget of \$492.2 million. The breakdown of the region's 2025 budget per impact area is as follows: "protect: attaining favourable protection environments", \$141.1 million; "respond: realizing rights in safe environments", \$128.2 million; "solve: securing solutions", \$94.0 million; and "empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality", \$88.0 million.

As of 31 January 2025, 10 per cent of the region's 2025 financial requirements were funded, considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

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