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

Distr.: Restricted
Original: English

Standing Committee
Ninety-sixth meeting

**Update on the route-based approach: from
strategy to implementation**

Summary

This update explains how UNHCR is implementing the route-based approach by enhancing protection, including protection at sea and anti-trafficking; improving referrals at key points along routes; strengthening asylum systems; expanding safe pathways and solutions; and using data, analysis and partnerships to make responses more comprehensive and effective. It also highlights persistent gaps and the need for sustained attention to further the three objectives of the approach: saving lives and reducing harm, strengthening asylum systems and expanding alternatives to dangerous journeys.

I. Introduction

1. Most refugees find protection in neighbouring countries, close to their country of origin. Yet insecurity, protection gaps, limited access to rights and services, constrained assistance, livelihood opportunities and insufficient solutions continue to cause displaced people to move onward. These movements often take place along routes also used by migrants seeking employment, education, family reunification or other opportunities. Refugees and migrants may travel together, however, they retain their distinct legal statuses.
2. The risks along these routes can be severe and cumulative. People may face death or disappearance at sea and in remote land corridors, trafficking, exploitation, violence, arbitrary detention, family separation, misinformation, loss of documentation and limited access to asylum procedures or basic services. In addition, the increasing number of people undertaking these dangerous journeys, and the diverse nature of their profiles and needs, including of international protection, creates complexity and increases pressure on asylum systems, reception capacities, border management, local services and coordination mechanisms.
3. The route-based approach is a strategic, holistic and cross-border, cross-regional framework developed by UNHCR and the International Migration Organization (IOM), within their respective mandates and in collaboration with partners, to better understand and assist States in responding to protection risks and support pathways to solutions – including durable solutions for refugees – in the context of mixed and onward movements of refugees and migrants. It focuses on displacement trends, and movement dynamics along key routes, from countries of origin, transit and asylum countries, as well as destination countries.
4. The goal of the route-based approach is to provide protection and solutions, wherever people are in their journey and respecting their choices, by saving lives and reducing harm, strengthening asylum systems and expanding alternatives to dangerous journeys.

II. Elements of the route-based approach

5. UNHCR's protection-sensitive responses along routes used in mixed and onward movements are grounded in the following three main considerations. First, movements along the same route are not driven by one factor. Route-level analysis, including along the Western Balkan route¹, shows that some people with international protection needs have fled conflict, persecution or insecurity, while others may move for economic or other reasons. Responses are too often restrictive and fragmented, emphasizing border and migration control to the detriment of access to rights, and fail to ensure strategic interventions along routes where risks are highest. This confirms the need for differentiated responses that identify persons in need of international protection early as well as preserved access to asylum.
6. Second, protection risks concentrate at particular points along routes, including border crossings, disembarkation points, remote transit areas, informal settlements, detention facilities and locations where people rely on smugglers. By focusing on timely identification of vulnerable individuals, referrals to specialized services and targeted assistance at these risk-prone locations, UNHCR and partners are preventing people from experiencing further harm.
7. Third, onward movement is often linked to gaps in protection, assistance, opportunities and durable solutions. When forcibly displaced people cannot access documentation, asylum procedures, education, health care, livelihoods, family unity or legal pathways, they may continue moving despite the risks. The route-based approach therefore connects immediate protection responses with support for strengthening national systems and expanding access to opportunities and durable solutions.

¹ UNHCR, Mixed movements in South-Eastern Europe: Understanding Diverse Motivations and Intentions, February 2026, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/mixed-movements-south-eastern-europe-understanding-diverse-motivations-and-intentions>

III. Working with States and other partners to improve protection outcomes

8. Maritime routes continue to exact a severe human toll. In 2025, according to data from UNHCR, authorities and partners, more than 2,800 individuals were reported dead or missing at sea on the Mediterranean, South-East Asia and the Western Africa Atlantic routes. UNHCR, in collaboration with the International Maritime Organization and the International Chamber of Shipping developed the revised edition in 2026, of the *Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice as Applied to Refugees and Migrants*. Aimed primarily at shipmasters and crews of private vessels involved in search and rescue operations, the Guide is a practical tool to support coordinated rescue-at-sea involving refugees and migrants. At the country level, in Bangladesh, for example UNHCR delivered the first workshop for Bangladesh Coast Guard officials on lifesaving maritime responses and refugee protection.

9. Trafficking remains one of the most serious protection risks along mixed and onward movement routes, particularly for women, children and youth. In close collaboration with host countries, UNHCR and partners continue to provide life-saving support, shelter, psychosocial support and legal assistance to victims of trafficking. In areas identified as high risk of trafficking UNHCR and partners are supporting States in identifying victims of trafficking or those at risk of trafficking and referring them to specialized services. In Sudan, UNHCR and IOM revitalized the Mixed Movement Working Group in 2025, supporting the strengthening of border monitoring, early warning and anti-trafficking responses. These monitoring and community alert efforts supported more than 700 victims of trafficking, demonstrating how effective coordination can lead to meaningful protection outcomes.

10. A central element of strengthening immediate protection and assistance along routes has been the establishment of Multi-Purpose Hubs in countries including Bulgaria, Chad, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Morocco and Niger. Positioned strategically, these hubs provide integrated services enabling access to immediate assistance and referral mechanisms, contributing to early stabilization and reduced vulnerabilities that may otherwise prompt onward movement. The hubs support the broader protection ecosystem by strengthening coordination and mutual referrals among relevant actors and facilitating access to essential services for refugees, migrants and others on the move.

11. UNHCR is focusing on asylum systems as a central element of the route-based approach. To guide global efforts, in October 2025, UNHCR issued the *Strategic Approach to Strengthening National Asylum Systems*.² Efficient, fair and accessible asylum systems help ensure that people in need of international protection are identified and protected in a timely manner. Faster and more predictable asylum processing strengthens confidence in national systems, reduces prolonged uncertainty for applicants and can help prevent onward movement caused by lack of access to protection. The strategic approach promotes a holistic, system-wide effort to improve quality by addressing legal and policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and procedural arrangements as interconnected and mutually reinforcing components. Therefore, UNHCR is working with governments, such as Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, to expand accelerated and simplified procedures and to address backlogs of asylum cases, for example through group-based recognition. Complementary pathways for legal stay have also contributed to easing pressure on asylum systems while expanding access to protection. In Colombia, the Temporary Protection Status has regularized the situation of millions of Venezuelans, granting legal residence and access to basic rights. While not a substitute for asylum, such arrangements play a complementary role within the route-based approach by providing stability and protection during displacement, reducing vulnerability and mitigating risks associated with onward movement driven by irregular status.

12. UNHCR is working alongside host countries to support their national efforts. When refugees and stateless persons have documentation, as well as access to education, health care, livelihoods and national services, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about their lives and futures. In Chad, for example, efforts being made to integrate refugees

² UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Strategic Approach to Strengthening National Asylum Systems*, October 2025, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/strategy/unhcr/2025/en/150734>

into the national identification system, including identification numbers embedded in their identity documents, as well as education efforts such as refugee access to tertiary education through scholarship schemes. Together, these measures reduce reliance on parallel systems, facilitate more consistent access to services, expand opportunities for young people and strengthen social cohesion. In Brazil, civil society and the private sector further support inclusion by promoting refugees' economic participation through microcredit, skills training, cultural entrepreneurship and employment opportunities that enhance income and social inclusion.

13. The route-based approach supports responsibility-sharing by promoting legal admission pathways. In 2025, 19 States collectively provided more than 30,000 resettlement and complementary pathway places, with UNHCR submissions exceeding 32,000 individuals. Along the Central Mediterranean route, Emergency Transit Mechanisms in Rwanda enabled evacuation, protection and onward solutions for more than 130 vulnerable refugees from Libya. Italy enabled more than 350 refugees to reach safety through humanitarian corridors and emergency evacuations. In mixed movement contexts, UNHCR has also issued guidance³ on effective return systems, while stressing the need for safeguards and respect for the principle of non-refoulement. Though these numbers represent a fraction of the global needs, these initiatives have a far-reaching impact in providing prospects and potential alternatives to dangerous journeys.

IV. Data, partnerships and collective action

14. A defining feature of UNHCR's route-based approach is the increasing use of route-level data and analysis. In 2025, UNHCR expanded this work across major corridors, producing assessments of movement dynamics, risks and protection gaps. Collaboration with the Mixed Migration Centre and IOM strengthened the evidence base, including through joint overviews of movements along the Central Mediterranean route. Along the Atlantic route, UNHCR and IOM, with non-governmental organizations and national authorities, mapped protection and assistance services across countries. This helped identify critical gaps and inform coordinated planning.

15. In 2026, UNHCR launched the *Routes Monitor*, a data platform designed to provide a more comprehensive picture of mixed and onward movements across key routes.⁴ The platform combines quantitative data on trends and movements with qualitative information on intentions and protection needs. This matters because effective responses require more than arrival figures. They require an understanding of why people move, where they face harm, what services they can access and what alternatives are available.

16. The route-based approach depends on multi-level partnerships. In 2025, UNHCR and IOM convened regional, route-specific consultations, including exchanges with West and Central African States and a workshop in Eastern and Southern Africa that brought governments, regional bodies, UN agencies, civil society, academia and refugee-led organizations together around coordinated action.⁵ UNHCR also established a refugee-led organization reference group under the route-based approach, reinforcing the centrality of refugee perspectives in shaping context-responsive interventions. Cooperation is also being strengthened with faith-based actors, national human rights institutions and academia to support the route-based approach.

V. Way forward

17. The route-based approach is generating results in strengthening protection for people in mixed and onward movements. Guided by this framework, UNHCR, together with States

³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *The Need for Effective Returns Systems and the Potential Role of Return Hubs*, March 2025,

<https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2025/en/149708>

⁴ Routes Monitor is accessible at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/route_based_approach

⁵ UNHCR, IOM, MMC, *Data-Driven Route-Based Approaches to Mixed Movements of Migrants and Refugees: Research and Response*, April 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/122213>

and partners, has improved identification, assistance and referral at key points along routes, supported more efficient and accessible asylum procedures, and strengthened early analysis of risks to inform more targeted responses. Through strengthened data, partnerships and operational engagement, States and partners are increasingly able to anticipate movements, address protection risks and deliver more coherent responses across countries of origin, transit, asylum and destination.

18. At the same time, significant challenges persist. Progress remains uneven across regions, and in many contexts people in need of international protection are not able to access asylum procedures, basic services and other forms of assistance. Asylum systems continue to face pressure, including persistent backlogs and capacity constraints. Refugees and other vulnerable individuals on the move remain exposed to trafficking, exploitation and violence, particularly along remote or poorly monitored routes. Safe and regular pathways remain far below global needs, and limited access to solutions, including resettlement and complementary pathways and development-oriented responses, continues to drive onward movement and constrain protection outcomes.

19. The route-based approach is an important part of UNHCR's broader protection response. Sustained cooperation and structured dialogue among States across countries of origin, transit, asylum and destination is essential to ensure coherence between national policies, support a shared understanding of evolving dynamics, and translate commitments into coordinated responses along priority corridors. Its implementation also requires clearer alignment of roles and responsibilities, and stronger partnerships across humanitarian, development and other actors. UNHCR, will continue to prioritise this work along routes where protection needs are the most urgent, in close collaboration with States, IOM and other relevant partners.
