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Emergency preparedness and response

Summary

This paper outlines progress made by UNHCR in emergency preparedness and response since the introduction of the “Policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities” in 2015. It provides an update on the mandatory review of the policy undertaken in early 2017, which was based on extensive internal consultations as well as assessments of lessons learned, “real time” reviews and workshops on emergency preparedness and response involving UNHCR staff, partners and other relevant stakeholders. The paper also outlines UNHCR’s priorities in terms of preparedness and response, and key challenges.

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I. Introduction

1. By the end of 2015, more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced around the world, the highest in decades. The majority were displaced within their own countries, often at risk and with limited access to protection and assistance. Solutions for refugees remained elusive, with the number of refugees able to return voluntarily to their countries of origin particularly low.

2. Although no new system-wide level-3 emergencies were declared in 2016, complex protracted situations and recurrent conflict continued to cause internal and cross-border displacement. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) system-wide level-3 emergency declarations for Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen remained in effect, as did UNHCR's emergency declarations for the Burundi, Iraq, South Sudan and Syria situations, as well as for inside Yemen. In August 2016, UNHCR elevated the emergency declaration for inside Nigeria from level-2 to level-3. In February 2017, these six UNHCR emergency declarations covered more than 25 countries affected by large-scale displacement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The emergency declarations for the Central African Republic, Myanmar, Uganda¹ and Ukraine, as well as for the Europe situation, and Djibouti and Somalia,² were deactivated in 2016.

3. UNHCR and its partners faced enormous challenges in addressing the needs of those displaced by these emergencies, with staff working in increasingly unsafe and complex operational environments. Many emergency situations were characterized by violent extremism, criminality and disregard for civilian life. The Office was deeply concerned about gross and systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, in some cases including the obstruction of humanitarian interventions that were intended to mitigate the suffering of affected populations, through the deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers.

4. In 2016, there were a number of new initiatives at the global level to support displaced populations, setting a new direction for humanitarian assistance. The World Humanitarian Summit resulted in a range of commitments to promote flexibility, efficiency and coherence in emergency preparedness and response by donors and humanitarian agencies, including by greater engagement with local actors. The comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF), adopted as part of the 2016 New York Declaration for refugees and migrants, also emphasized collective engagement to strengthen the resilience and self-reliance of refugees and their host communities, as well as to explore opportunities for solutions, including from the outset of emergencies.

5. Emergency response is one of the five key areas of UNHCR's strategic directions for 2017 – 2021.³ Against this background, UNHCR continued to review and adapt its emergency preparedness and response. Following the implementation of the "Policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities", which was issued in 2015, a comprehensive review was conducted to capture good practices and lessons learned in order to adjust the policy to emerging needs in 2017 and beyond. This paper presents an overview of achievements in 2015 and 2016, and outlines the way forward based on the updated policy.

¹ The emergency declaration for Uganda was deactivated for refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo only.

² The emergency declarations for Djibouti and Somalia formed part of the level-3 emergency declaration for Yemen.

³ Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/excom/announce/5894558d4/unhcrs-strategic-directions-2017-2021.html>.

II. Strengthening emergency preparedness

6. Following the reconfiguration of UNHCR's emergency response capacity in December 2014, strengthening emergency preparedness became a priority for the organization. A dedicated team at headquarters was established to provide guidance and support to field operations in countries at high risk of experiencing a new or deteriorating emergency, including through a review of and advice on contingency planning. The high alert list for emergency preparedness (HALEP) was introduced as a key tool for early warning and monitoring of current and potential risks of displacement. It also included measures to assess the readiness and response capacity of UNHCR operations. UNHCR's efforts to strengthen emergency preparedness also encompassed initiatives with respect to protection, age, gender and diversity, cash-based interventions, alternatives to camps and local partnerships.

7. Supply readiness was strengthened through the pre-positioning of relief items closer to "hot spot" areas, as well as increasing logistics capacity to support operations more rapidly. In 2015, two regional warehouses in Djibouti and Kampala were established to support the refugee situations caused by violence in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Yemen.

8. UNHCR was actively engaged in various initiatives at the global level in terms of emergency preparedness and response, including the "Ready to Respond" initiative to strengthen inter-agency cooperation and build on best practices. UNHCR also undertook consultations with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to identify priorities for joint approaches to emergency preparedness with local actors. Such a joint approach was implemented in the United Republic of Tanzania in 2016, and the Office expected to continue to promote this approach in other operations in 2017, with a focus on identifying and complementing existing local capacities, analysis and planning, protection-centred preparedness, and capacity building.

9. UNHCR also continued to actively engage in the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG), to follow emerging situations and provide joint emergency responses.

III. Providing emergency response

A. Standby capacity and emergency deployments

10. The rapid deployment of staff by UNHCR and partners played a critical role in the organization's emergency preparedness and response. In 2016, over 370 deployments and missions were undertaken to support some 37 country operations. In 2015 and 2016, the senior corporate emergency roster (SCER) was used to deploy senior staff to support operations in Burundi, Iraq, Nigeria, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Yemen, as well as in response to the situation in Europe.

11. In early 2015, multifunctional emergency services standby teams, led by senior emergency coordinators, were established with the aim of ensuring rapid and effective responses in the field. These teams were in high demand and played a key role in terms of leadership and coordination in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Greece, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania in 2016. As an example, such a team led the establishment of two new settlements in northern Uganda for over 300,000 refugees from South Sudan. Emergency deployments also supported the implementation of the refugee coordination model (RCM). Further, to ensure the necessary capacity, new functional rosters were created for human resources, supply and programme. Protection and administration/finance rosters were expected to be developed in 2017.

12. The year 2016 marked the 25th anniversary of emergency standby partnerships. Initiated in 1991 during the first Iraq war, standby partnerships continued to provide expert surge personnel to fill crucial staffing gaps in emergency operations, expanding humanitarian outreach and strengthening partnerships. Eighteen standby partners were in place in 2016, including two new agreements with Dutch Surge Support (DSS water) (supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands) on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and with iMAPP to fill information management gaps in emergencies. Service packages and technical support provided by partners to UNHCR included communications, logistics and engineering assistance for staff accommodation and offices, as well as venues, accommodation and base camps for emergency training events.

13. UNHCR also further developed a new partnership model for emergency preparedness through refugee emergency response agreements (RERA). The aim of RERA was to ensure that gaps in emergency response where local capacity was lacking could be rapidly filled by an international NGO partner. Agreements were established with various partners, including the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Action Contre La Faim (ACF) in the areas of: camp coordination and camp management (CCCM); shelter; community-based protection; WASH; housing, land and property; education; prevention and response to gender-based violence; health; and cash-based interventions.

B. Training and tools

14. UNHCR's Emergency Service continued to provide training, guidance and tools for emergency preparedness and response. Emergency trainings, such as the workshop on emergency management (WEM), the senior emergency leadership programme (SELP), and situational emergency trainings (SETs), were provided to more than 1,200 UNHCR, government and partner staff. The online "Emergency handbook" provided staff in the field with access to guidance, through the webpage (available from <https://emergency.unhcr.org/>) and on the mobile phone application.

15. UNHCR's "Emergency Lab" worked to strengthen the organization's engagement with communities ("communicating with communities") and accountability to affected populations (AAP) in emergency contexts. In 2016, the Emergency Lab supported operations in Malawi, Niger, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Uganda to develop innovative solutions to communication challenges. As an example, in the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda, home to more than 270,000 refugees from South Sudan, a mobile information service was developed to provide refugees with vital information and answers to their questions. Through collaboration with local mobile network operators, 3G mobile coverage was also rapidly extended to Bidi Bidi settlement.

C. Policy development

16. The 2015 "Policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities" provided a framework for UNHCR's engagement in emergencies, seeking to enhance consistency and accountability. In 2015 and 2016, a series of "real time" reviews, consultations and evaluations were undertaken to identify lessons learned and inform a review of the policy.

17. The review focused on the following areas: operational preparedness; timeliness and automaticity of emergency response; adequate resource allocation; effective protection and programme delivery; leadership, coordination and decision making; and accountabilities.

18. Following the review, the following measures were introduced to further enhance preparedness and response to emergencies:

- (i) The introduction of a new “level-1” for enhanced preparedness, triggering automatic actions and responsibilities to carry out risk analysis and preparedness measures;
- (ii) automaticity in terms of human, material, financial and programming support provided for emergency levels 1-3;
- (iii) re-affirmation of principles to guide leadership and clarification of leadership models;
- (iv) simplified internal coordination models for the field and headquarters; and
- (v) clear accountabilities at country level and headquarters.

IV. Key priorities

19. In 2016, a number key priorities were identified to shape UNHCR’s efforts in 2017 and beyond in the area of emergency preparedness and response. These priorities were established in response to gaps and needs in recent emergencies, and drew on internal and external consultations carried out as part of the review of the 2015 policy:

- (i) Finalize the revision of the “Policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities” to simplify existing procedures, provide clear guidance, and ensure institutional accountabilities relating to emergency preparedness and response.
- (ii) Strengthen early warning and preparedness through the implementation of HALEP; ensure that preparedness actions undertaken in high-risk contexts take full account of national capacities, especially at the local level; review and implement the UNHCR preparedness package for refugee emergencies and, in IDP contexts, the IASC emergency response preparedness guidance.
- (iii) Invest in capacity building for staff, partners and national actors in terms of emergency preparedness and response. The role of national actors as first local responders and equal partners should be particularly taken into account.
- (iv) Increase rapid and effective deployments to new emergencies by reinforcing the UNHCR emergency roster for specialized functions such as protection, programme, supply, and administration and finance, as well as by expanding emergency standby agreements.
- (v) Increase the use of innovative tools (including cash-based interventions where appropriate) to reinforce the effectiveness and efficiency of UNHCR interventions in emergencies.
- (vi) Focus on identifying solutions from the outset of emergency situations, including through initiatives such as the CRRF that engage a broader range of actors, including development organizations. Prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) will also remain at the core of UNHCR’s emergency preparedness and response.

V. Key challenges

20. In the context of an increasingly complex operating environment, UNHCR expects that it will face a number of challenges in ongoing and future emergencies, requiring the engagement of members of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. These include:

- (i) increasing politicization in some emergencies, with the neutral and impartial nature of humanitarian interventions by UNHCR and its partners not being recognized, exposing humanitarian workers to heightened security risks;
 - (ii) shrinking humanitarian space and restrictions on humanitarian access, with more limited access for refugees and asylum-seekers to international protection and assistance; and
 - (iii) maintaining adequate financial, material and human resources to prepare for and respond to new emergencies or to worsening protracted situations in countries where international attention is fading.
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