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Update on UNHCR's operations in the East and Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes region

A. Situational analysis including new developments

By the end of 2021, countries in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted 4.9 million refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority from South Sudan (2.27 million), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (755,000) and Somalia (574,000). Uganda hosts the largest population of refugees in Africa (1.56 million), followed by Sudan (1.13 million), Ethiopia (817,000) and Kenya (540,000). The region is home to around 60 per cent of the refugees and asylum-seekers on the continent.

In 2021, nearly 200,000 people were newly displaced across borders, with the majority seeking asylum in Sudan (100,000), Uganda (60,000) and Ethiopia (17,000). The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and associated containment measures had initially resulted in an overall decline in arrivals, compared to the years prior to the pandemic. However, in 2021 there was an increase of around 25 per cent compared to 2020, due to the conflict in Tigray and the partial reopening of borders.

In addition, there are some 12 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, namely in Ethiopia (4.24 million), Sudan (3.04 million), Somalia (2.97 million), South Sudan (2.02 million) and Burundi (116,000).

The operational environment in the 11 countries in the region is characterized by socioeconomic fragility and political volatility, which affect areas hosting refugees and IDPs. The situation of forcibly displaced persons in the region is exacerbated by climate shocks, food insecurity and the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, the protection environment is adversely impacted by violence and political instability, including communal fighting.

Current challenges in the region that may lead to further forced displacement include conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, tensions along the Eritrea-Ethiopia-Sudan border, a fragile peace process in South Sudan, political transition and inter-communal conflict in Sudan, political complexities and ongoing conflict in Somalia, human rights violations in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and post-crisis challenges in Burundi.

UNHCR collaborated with the East African Community (EAC), the International Conference for the Great Lakes (IGCLR), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the African Union Commission in an effort to ensure that the rights of refugees and other persons of concern were upheld and that they effectively benefited from regional protection frameworks granting them access to services and civil documentation.

Situational updates

Fifteen months into the conflict that began in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in November 2020, some 60,000 new refugees have arrived in Sudan. The emergency response remains focused on providing life-saving assistance and protection in the new refugee camps in Gedaref and Blue Nile States in Sudan, while ensuring preparedness in the event of a new influx. In Ethiopia, humanitarian access was challenging throughout 2021, with intermittent improvements. In 2022, UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance for Eritrean

refugees displaced within and from Tigray, including tens of thousands who self-relocated to Addis Ababa. The establishment of a new site in the Amhara region is underway and is expected to host some 25,000 Eritrean refugees currently remaining in the camps in Tigray, as soon as voluntary relocation is possible. The expansion of UNHCR's presence in the Afar and Ahmara regions is ongoing and will improve outreach and assistance to the millions of Ethiopian IDPs in the northern region.

The situation in South Sudan has generated the largest refugee crisis in Africa, with the regional refugee response plan affected by underfunding. Despite some progress, peace remains fragile and humanitarian challenges, including acute food insecurity, persist. While UNHCR is not promoting or facilitating returns, over 500,000 South Sudanese have spontaneously returned since 2017. In response to the growing number of self-organized returns, UNHCR has developed a solutions-oriented, area-based approach targeting high return areas through investments in medium- to long-term development and peace interventions, called "Pockets of hope," which will be piloted in 2022. Intention-to-return surveys for South Sudanese refugees in Sudan and Uganda were carried out in 2021 to inform planning and will be carried out in Ethiopia in 2022.

In Sudan, recent political unrest has had adverse social and economic consequences for the country. While refugees from Ethiopia arrived in fewer numbers, some 45,000 South Sudanese arrived in 2021. The situation in Darfur remained tense throughout 2021, with food insecurity and localized conflicts aggravating the displacement situation.

Under the Solutions Initiative for Sudan and South Sudan, UNHCR worked with IGAD and other partners to advance frameworks for comprehensive solutions for refugees, IDPs and returnees. National solutions strategies were adopted across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus, building on the provisions for the displaced contained in the two countries' respective peace agreements.

In Somalia, UNHCR continues to provide assistance to IDPs, refugees and returnees impacted by persistent insecurity and climate shocks. A state of emergency was declared in November 2021 due to severe drought, affecting some 80 per cent of the country. The political scene is impacted by the delayed national elections which were planned for 2021. However, Somali leaders have announced an agreement to complete parliamentary elections in early 2022, followed by the presidential election. The ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia and Yemen may force Somali refugees to return home, while the decision by the Kenyan government to close refugee camps in 2022 may lead to an increase in refugee returns to Somalia.

In 2021, some 65,000 Burundi refugees returned home, compared to 40,000 in 2020. While UNHCR facilitates voluntary repatriation to those who express the desire to return, it is not currently promoting returns. The provision of international protection, humanitarian assistance and opportunities for inclusion remain important. Those who have repatriated require more support to ensure sustainable reintegration.

An estimated 25,000 refugees arrived in the region from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2021. In Burundi, a new camp is planned for Congolese refugees in 2022, to ease overcrowding in existing camps. At the same time, opportunities for return to more stable areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo from all asylum countries will be explored.

Mixed movements

Mixed movements in the Horn of Africa continue, mostly from Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia, with risks associated with human trafficking. Onward movements of refugees to northern Africa, the Mediterranean and southern Africa were influenced by a variety of factors such as the lack of effective protection in first countries of asylum. Efforts will be made in 2022 to monitor all routes and to enhance UNHCR's regional approach to mapping, monitoring and response to mixed movements.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities (GSPs) in 2021

Promoting a favourable protection environment

In 2021, most of the countries in the region lifted border restrictions associated with COVID-19. However, asylum-seekers remain challenged by the lack of access to some territories and experience difficulties reaping the benefits of inclusion due to quarantine measures and congested reception facilities. Despite UNHCR's demarches, incidents of refoulement occurred throughout 2021, in some asylum countries in the region. -The impact of COVID-19 on asylum remained significant. Access to asylum procedures was reduced, resulting in increased onward movements and higher numbers of unregistered asylum-seekers. Furthermore, refugee status determination procedures were constrained by high costs and slow decision-making, with more than 180,000 individual asylum applications pending individualized adjudication in 2021.

Child protection, preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse

Ongoing COVID-19 restrictions prevented full engagement with refugee and IDP communities, with community structures playing an important role in measures aimed at the prevention, mitigation and response to gender-based violence, ensuring child protection and other community-based programmes. The rollout of UNHCR's updated Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation and Response to Gender-based violence is underway in the region, with some countries supported to operationalize priority actions of the policy in 2021. Underfunding and staffing capacity remained a challenge. Despite this, specific efforts were undertaken to strengthen staffing in Ethiopia and Sudan to respond to the increased needs related to gender-based violence in the ongoing Tigray emergency. Proactive measures continued against sexual exploitation and abuse, including capacity-building for partners, community sensitization and awareness-raising activities, identification of key risks and a review of reporting mechanisms. Risks for children in emergency situations remained high due to school closures and other impacts of the pandemic, resulting in heightened exposure to abuse and exploitation.

Education

The education sector was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As co-chair of the Regional Education in Emergencies Working Group and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, UNHCR engaged with partners to share best practices and guidance materials to facilitate the safe re-opening of schools and minimize school dropouts, especially for girls. Close cooperation with ministries of education drove forward the inclusion agenda, with notable progress in the inclusion of refugees and returnees in national education sector plans and their costing.

Response to internal displacement

Ongoing and escalating conflicts in locations such as Tigray in Ethiopia and Darfur in Sudan presented challenges for IDP engagement in 2021, requiring UNHCR to focus on life-saving activities and sometimes employing remote protection monitoring and interventions. Climate-related displacements also affected the region. In Burundi, for example, 80 per cent of IDPs are displaced due to natural disasters and the adverse effects of climate change. In 2022, with flooding and other natural disasters affecting internal displacement in Somalia, South Sudan, and elsewhere, priority will be given to establishing frameworks in response to climate-induced displacement and focusing on preparedness mechanisms. UNHCR will also prioritize the improvement of protection delivery and monitoring systems, as well as the implementation of tri-cluster co-ordination strategies (protection; camp coordination and camp management; and shelter/non-food items). UNHCR will also work with national authorities in pursuing solutions to internal displacement.

Health

In 2021, the region's fragile health systems were adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the capacity for service delivery overstretched. Challenges included limited testing capacity, overcrowding and poor access to secondary and intensive care in a region that is also prone to other communicable disease outbreaks. Refugees, particularly those in urban areas, faced financial barriers in accessing primary health and hospital care in some countries. To address this issue, inclusion in health insurance schemes and social protection is being pursued wherever feasible. In 2022, UNHCR will seek to strengthen the health sector in collaboration with national authorities and technical support from the World Health Organization by ensuring refugee inclusion in national response strategies. Mobilizing additional resources for the COVID-19 vaccination will also be a priority.

Multi-sector cash assistance

In 2021, about 200,000 households (1 million individuals) benefited from cash assistance in the region, with a total of \$36 million disbursed. UNHCR operations have diversified cash interventions in energy, shelter, hygiene, livelihoods and repatriation. Cash is disbursed through digital methods, with 70 per cent of the cash transferred done through bank transfers, 10 per cent through mobile money and a smaller amount through prepaid cards. The findings from post-distribution monitoring indicated that 86.9 per cent of households preferred cash assistance combined with in-kind assistance. UNHCR has rolled out CashAssist software in the larger operations in the region who have cash-based interventions. In 2022, UNHCR, under the United Nations Common Cash Statement, will focus on joint programming, delivery and monitoring.

Food security

Funding shortfalls in 2021 resulted in the reduction of food aid to over 3.5 million refugees or 75 per cent of refugees in the region, primarily affecting refugees in Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Rwanda, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania. Ration cuts ranged between 20 and 60 per cent of the recommended daily 2100 kcal per person. This has severely affected refugees' well-being with high levels of acute malnutrition, stunting and anaemia reported.

Global Compact on Refugees/Global Refugee Forum

In 2021, considerable progress was recorded in the implementation of commitments made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, with over 80 per cent of pledges in progress. Under the IGAD Support Platform and as part of the [Nairobi Process](#), other endeavours included the Solutions Initiative for Sudan and South Sudan, stocktaking meetings on the [Kampala Declaration](#) on Livelihoods, the [Djibouti Declaration](#) on Education, and the [Nairobi Declaration](#) on Health.

In collaboration with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, UNHCR organized regional consultations with non-governmental organizations in 2021, where partners showcased progress on pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum and articulated their needs for support. Furthermore, monthly meetings of the [Regional Economic Inclusion Working Group](#) on forced displacement were held with non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, international financial institutions, civil society organizations and research institutes across the humanitarian-development nexus in eastern Africa to discuss progress toward livelihoods and the economic inclusion of refugees and other persons of concern.

Durable solutions

Returns resumed in early 2021 following the re-opening of borders and lifting of COVID-19 pandemic-related movement restrictions. Nearly 340,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin, including more than 64,000 facilitated returns to Burundi and nearly 270,000 self-organized returns to South Sudan. Over 300 Somalis were assisted to return, while some 2,300 who returned on their own were provided with support. UNHCR facilitated over 1,700 refugee returns to Rwanda, and over 700 refugees returned to Ethiopia. In 2022, UNHCR will support refugees who wish to return, while advocating that governments, humanitarian partners and development actors strengthen conditions for safe return and sustainable reintegration.

In 2021, resettlement activities in the region were impacted by insecurity and political instability in Ethiopia and Sudan, camp consolidation in Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania, and the impact of COVID-19. Nevertheless, several operations resumed resettlement field missions and in-person interviews. Over 22,500 resettlement places were allocated to the region, and submissions were made for 73 per cent of these places. In addition, 9,300 persons departed for resettlement, compared to 4,800 in 2020. In 2022, many countries sought creative ways to expand existing complementary pathways for refugees, including family reunification, labour mobility and educational opportunities.

Statelessness

In 2021, several countries made progress on pledges relating to eradicating statelessness. Rwanda published a new nationality law that facilitates naturalization for stateless persons. Progress was also made in ensuring that all refugees born in Rwanda are registered and issued with birth certificates. Rwanda is planning a nationwide survey in 2022 to identify stateless persons and those at risk of becoming stateless. In Kenya, the Government recognized 50 persons of Indian descent, and a petition to recognize persons of Pemba descent is under consideration.

UNHCR released a study on statelessness and citizenship in the Horn of Africa that analyses risk factors leading to statelessness in the region. UNHCR and the ICGLR Secretariat organized a meeting to review progress and take stock of the implementation of statelessness commitments. A study on protracted refugee situations, risks of statelessness and prospects for durable solutions in the Great Lakes region was also launched.

Risk management

In 2021, risk management training was prioritized, while resource constraints impacted the implementation of some risk treatments. A risk assessment was undertaken in relation to the solutions roadmap for camp-based refugees in Kenya, including in neighbouring countries of origin and return. In 2022, a key focus will be on the use of data to guide risk-based decisions and mitigation measures. The Risk Management Service will work with relevant operations to mitigate identified and emerging risks in the areas of partnerships, oversight, integrity, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and cash-based interventions.

C. Plans for 2022 and financial information

Selected impact areas

Safeguarding access to territorial protection and asylum procedures; ensuring protection against refoulement; and supporting the adoption of nationality laws that prevent and reduce statelessness:

An EAC/IGAD Regional Protection Dialogue, held in December 2021 provided recommendations to promote States' adherence to obligations concerning non-refoulement and the right to seek and enjoy asylum. In 2022 UNHCR will support States to develop the capacity of asylum institutions, including through special arrangements and other adaptive measures to permit access to territory, registration, documentation and quality refugee status determination for asylum-seekers.

Efforts towards the eradication of statelessness will include joint outreach with the Inter-Parliamentarian Union to raise awareness among parliamentarians in Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda on the importance of accession to the statelessness conventions and reform of domestic nationality laws to ensure compliance with international statelessness standards. UNHCR will undertake two legal studies with pro bono legal support to insert operational safeguards to remove gaps, in particular in legislation related to childhood statelessness.

Securing birth registration, profiling and individual documentation based on registration

Not all of 137,000 new births registered by UNHCR in the region in 2021 were formally recognized by civil authorities. UNHCR will seek to foster timely registration and certification

by relevant authorities. It will also provide advice on accessing substitute birth certificates for recognized refugees who lack such documentation.

Reducing protection risks faced by people of concern, in particular, discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence and specific risks faced by children

In 2022, UNHCR will focus on engaging and building the capacity of local and refugee-led organizations, including reflections on lessons learned in the piloting of special grant agreements in Uganda in 2021. Other areas of focus will include strengthening information management systems for the prevention of gender-based violence and for child protection, as well as supporting the formulation of contextualized country-level child protection strategies.

Expanding opportunities for durable solutions for persons of concern, particularly those in protracted situations of displacement, including by strengthening the use of comprehensive approaches and contributing to sustainable reintegration, local settlement and successful resettlement in third countries

In 2022 UNHCR will explore legal pathways to local integration, where accessible to refugees under existing legislation. An increase in resettlement places is anticipated in 2022, which will require scaling up of internal capacity to meet the increased quotas expected from 2022 to 2024.

Financial information

In 2021, the region's financial requirements of \$1,901.8 million were 51 per cent funded. The ongoing Tigray emergency, response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises such as floods and drought, increased funding needs in the region.

In 2022, the region will require \$1,880.2 million to provide protection and assistance to refugees and displaced people, to support the response to COVID-19 and its impact, as well as to address the ongoing Tigray emergency and prospective returns to Burundi, South Sudan and elsewhere. With more than 80 per cent of refugees residing in camps and settlements, the region hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa, and more support is needed in 2022 to provide assistance and services while investing in inclusion initiatives and solutions.

As of 25 January 2022, some 8 per cent of the region's 2022 financial requirements are funded taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
