

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

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**Update on UNHCR operations in Eastern and Southern
Africa**

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

By the end of 2025, the Eastern and Southern Africa region hosted 24 million forcibly displaced, including 6.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 17.6 million internally displaced persons. The majority of refugees and asylum-seekers were hosted in Uganda (1.9 million), Ethiopia (1.1 million), the Sudan (860,000), and Kenya (836,000). Internally displaced persons were concentrated primarily in the Sudan (9.3 million), Somalia (3.3 million), South Sudan (2 million), Ethiopia (1.9 million) and Mozambique (1.3 million).

The Sudan situation

The conflict in the Sudan intensified during 2025 and remains the largest displacement and protection crisis in the world. By the end of the year, 4.3 million people, of which 3.6 million were Sudanese, had crossed into neighbouring countries, including the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan and Uganda. An additional 7.3 million of those internally displaced since April 2023 remained displaced within the Sudan. The conflict has been characterized by sexual violence, arbitrary killings and the targeted persecution of ethnic groups. The delivery of humanitarian aid remains a major challenge due to ongoing insecurity and limited accessibility. Even as conflict raged across several parts of the Sudan, 3.5 million Sudanese returned to their areas of origin, of whom 720,500 returned from countries of asylum.

UNHCR will coordinate the Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan for 2026, which involves 123 partners and prioritizes immediate emergency needs and “solutions from the start” approach aimed at building resilience and integrating refugees into national systems. The Development Partners Group for the Sudan Regional Crisis, co-led with the United Nations Development Coordination Office, plan a principals-level meeting in 2026 to accelerate support and investment in solutions.

South Sudan situation

Escalating violence in South Sudan has displaced some 371,000 people internally and deepened humanitarian needs, a situation which was compounded by soaring prices, flooding and a sharp decline in humanitarian funding. Some 195,000 people fled to neighbouring countries in 2025. Challenges in implementing the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan could heighten the risk of renewed armed confrontation and further displacement in 2026.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo situation

Despite peace efforts, the humanitarian situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo deteriorated in December 2025. Renewed fighting forced over 100,000 people to flee, mainly to Burundi, in addition to over 136,000 earlier arrivals across the region in 2025.

Burundi situation

The promotion of voluntary repatriation to Burundi continued, despite the country’s limited capacity to absorb returnees. Since 2017, some 198,000 of the 248,000 returns

to Burundi have been from the United Republic of Tanzania. UNHCR will continue its efforts to work together with the Governments of Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania to uphold the arrangements agreed in the November 2025 tripartite meeting to accelerate voluntary repatriation while ensuring safety, dignity and protection standards. The promotion of voluntary repatriation will continue in all countries hosting Burundian refugees and a regional meeting on comprehensive solutions for Burundian refugees is being convened by UNHCR and concerned governments in Nairobi in March 2026.

Mozambique

Humanitarian conditions in northern Mozambique have sharply deteriorated since March 2025, with over 300,000 people newly displaced since July 2025. Recent flooding there has also displaced 400,000 people. The surge in violence, compounded by cyclones and floods, is overwhelming humanitarian operations while affected communities continue to face heightened protection risks, including violence, family separation, psychological distress, barriers to accessing essential services and exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Extreme weather

Forecasts for early 2026 indicate severe drought in eastern Kenya and Somalia, alongside heightened flooding risks in Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, parts of South Africa, southern United Republic of Tanzania and eastern Zambia due to heavy rainfall and cyclones. Priorities for UNHCR in 2026 include strengthening early warning and anticipatory action, expanding protection services and facilitating investment in resilience-based programming.

Mixed movements

The region experienced complex mixed population movements due to protection and socio-economic pressures, with displaced people travelling through the East and Horn of Africa toward Yemen and the Gulf Cooperation Council States; across the Mediterranean toward Europe; through the Western Indian Ocean to Mayotte; and southward into Southern Africa. According to UNHCR data, there was a 15 per cent year-on-year increase in onward movements of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region.

The West Indian Ocean States of the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles have facilitated efforts by UNHCR to identify persons in need of international protection, to advance alternatives to detention and to uphold the principle of non-refoulement as enshrined in international customary law.

Aligned with the route-based approach, UNHCR will continue to work with States, regional economic communities, the International Organization of Migration, civil society, and refugee-led organizations to prioritize enhanced coordination. Priorities include promoting protection-sensitive entry and admission, strengthening asylum systems, and expanding access to essential services, complementary pathways and safe return options. UNHCR will also focus on providing timely, accurate information on viable alternative solutions to dangerous journeys, while addressing the root drivers of onward movement.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2025 and updated plans for 2026

Attaining favourable protection environments

Territorial access is generally unrestricted across the region, but several countries applied inconsistent access to asylum procedures. These barriers have left many asylum-seekers unregistered, undocumented and excluded from legal protection and at heightened risk of arrest, detention and refoulement. Delays in asylum processing have resulted in a backlog of over 700,000 asylum-seekers awaiting decisions, some for several years.

UNHCR will continue supporting States and engaging with regional bodies to promote harmonized policies that strengthen refugee protection and inclusion across the region, ensuring asylum systems that are fair, efficient, transparent and sustainable.

South Africa has developed innovative solutions to promote social cohesion, including a project aimed at countering misinformation, led by the Department of Education.

Legal Reforms

With support from UNHCR, several countries in Southern Africa including Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia and Zimbabwe are reviewing their Refugee Acts, bringing them in line with international standards and in some cases lifting reservations to the 1951 Convention as well as committing to accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

South Africa's draft White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection outlines an ambitious agenda to reform the country's national asylum system, reaffirms its commitments to the 1951 Convention, the use of digitalization, and upholds the rights to a nationality.

Promoting protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

In 2025, UNHCR focused its response to internal displacement to ensure targeted protection services, including through its leadership of the protection cluster, delivering non-food items, expanding cash-based assistance, and strengthening coordination across sectors to address critical gaps and pursuing solutions to displacement wherever possible.

UNHCR will continue to safeguard and enhance protection and access to essential services for internally displaced persons, expand community-based responses, and support national authorities to lead sustainable and inclusive solutions for the internally displaced.

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

Gender-based violence remains widespread and exacerbated by conflict, climate shocks and economic instability. Reduced funding has limited access to safe spaces and specialized services. In response, UNHCR is reinforcing community-based approaches and working with governments, women- and refugee-led groups to sustain essential survivor-centred services and deliver more impactful programming. Regional priorities for 2026 include scaling up evidence-based prevention models and strengthening coordination and accountability across stakeholders. A new information management system will be rolled out for safer data collection on gender-based violence.

Three million forcibly displaced children in the region, of which 10 per cent are highly vulnerable, face heightened protection risks. Despite limited resources, governments such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda are increasing efforts to integrate refugee children into national systems. In 2026, UNHCR and partners will continue to support more government- and community-led protection structures.

Realizing rights in safe environments

Education

Progress continued toward expanding inclusion in national education systems. As of September 2025, Rwanda has integrated all refugee students into the national system, including assuming responsibility for teacher costs, while Burundi and Kenya finalized costed strategies for refugee inclusion. In Ethiopia and South Sudan, the "solutions from the start" approach expanded public schools, enabling immediate

enrolment with language and curriculum support. In Zambia, refugees continued to access free education, from early childhood development through secondary school.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue advocacy and support to Member States to ensure the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) Regional Qualifications Framework, designed to standardize recognition of prior learning and facilitate educational and labour mobility, is translated into national guidelines. UNHCR will intensify efforts to advance refugee inclusion in national education systems, supporting States to develop costed inclusion plans, and documenting good practices across the East African Community, IGAD and the South African Development Community.

Health

Refugees continue to face barriers to primary health care. UNHCR will strengthen refugee inclusion in national health systems, particularly through expanded access to insurance schemes in Kenya and Rwanda, for example, while reinforcing epidemic preparedness and response with governments and partners. In Botswana, the Government has reaffirmed its commitment to advance sustainable responses for refugees in Dukwi settlement and has allocated national budgetary resources to implement a transition plan to promote self-reliance including by strengthening access to health services in Dukwi clinic, which serves refugee and host communities.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

In 2025, UNHCR focused on safeguarding the rights of refugees by expanding access to legal protection, education and livelihoods, while ensuring that women and girls were protected from gender-based violence and included in leadership and decision-making processes.

Building on this foundation, in 2026, UNHCR will deepen its engagement with other United Nations agencies and refugee hosting states to advance inclusion in national systems and promote gender equality. This includes supporting women's leadership, economic empowerment, and participation in governance, as well as integrating gender-responsive approaches across humanitarian and development programmes. These efforts will strengthen the capacity of displaced women, girls, men and boys to rebuild their lives with dignity, challenge discriminatory gender norms and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Providing cash and multisectoral assistance

In 2025, UNHCR provided cash assistance to 450,000 people. Most assistance was multi-purpose, and all emergency operations used cash as a response modality. Monitoring shows high satisfaction and improved living conditions, although most households still meet only half or less of their basic needs. Digital payment options have expanded. In 2026, UNHCR aims to raise cash assistance to 10 per cent of available funds, further expand digital payments and increase the number of women receiving cash directly.

Addressing food insecurity

Refugees across the region continued to face severe food insecurity in 2025, with ration cuts of 30 to 80 per cent. Ongoing resource shortages have forced an accelerated move toward targeted, vulnerability-based food assistance, now applied in Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda. Malnutrition remains a major concern, affecting one in ten refugee children, especially new arrivals. The Southern Africa region experienced similar pressures, with rations varying between 50 and 70 per cent in Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe, while Mozambique fully transitioned from general food distributions to resilience and livelihoods support. These trends highlight deepening food insecurity and the urgent need for sustained resources and stronger partnerships with the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and international financial institutions, to protect nutrition and advance refugee self-reliance.

Advancing solutions

Leveraging Global Refugee Forum pledges

In 2025, the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review reinforced high-level commitment to advance inclusion and transition generating renewed impetus for government-led reforms across the region. This translated into concrete milestones, including the launch of national inclusion and self-reliance frameworks such as the Shirika Plan of Kenya and the Makatet roadmap in Ethiopia, as well as the adoption of a national transition strategy in Uganda to advance the handover of services to national systems. Rwanda advanced its transition from camps to settlements and launched a government-led strategy to enable 50 per cent of refugees to achieve self-reliance by 2030. Botswana and Namibia also agreed on transition plans with UNHCR, under which their governments will assume assistance and social protection for refugees living in settlements. Collectively, these reforms mark a shift from policy commitments toward structured, nationally-owned transition pathways. They are being underpinned by sustained and aligned financing from a wide range of partners.

Expanding development partnerships

In 2025, UNHCR deepened and expanded its collaboration with international financial institutions and bilateral development partners to better align financing, policies and programmes in support of the inclusion and self-reliance of refugees and internally displaced persons. Development actors including the European Union, Germany, the Kingdom of the Netherlands Partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced persons and host communities (PROSPECTS)¹, the World Bank and others – continued to scale their investments. The start of the International Development Association’s twenty-first replenishment cycle (World Bank IDA-21) in mid-2025 further renewed dialogue on how financing can support the sustainable transition of services to national systems. The African Development Bank approved new investments in Djibouti, Somalia and South Sudan, and also launched a two-year joint action plan with UNHCR in Rwanda, further expanding the region’s development architecture for displacement-affected populations.

In 2026, these partnerships will be leveraged to advance service transitions, support policy reforms, scale self-reliance initiatives, and ensure partner financing aligns with government-led inclusion priorities and long-term strengthening of national social service systems.

Self-reliance

While UNHCR continues to pursue greater self-reliance, administrative restrictions, limited job availability, high unemployment rates and unfavourable legal frameworks in some countries have resulted in low employment rates among forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

In 2025, partnerships with the private sector, development actors and international financial institutions were further deepened to expand employment and livelihood opportunities, with this momentum set to accelerate in 2026. The International Finance Corporation and UNHCR continued their close collaboration in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, including through the Partnership for improving prospects for forcibly displaced persons and host communities (PROSPECTS), alongside complementary initiatives with Mastercard Foundation.

In Zambia, a government-led agriculture roadmap, combined with an enabling land and tenure framework, has created conditions for transitioning refugees and host communities into commercial value chains. Cooperation with the African Development Bank was further strengthened, mobilizing additional financing to ease barriers to private sector investment – particularly infrastructure constraints – in refugee-hosting and return areas. In Malawi, UNHCR is exploring the inclusion of

¹ The project is implemented by UNHCR, the International Finance Corporation, International Labour Organization, 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.

refugees in agricultural projects financed by the World Bank, while in Zimbabwe, private sector actors such as Seed-Co are engaging with refugee farmers to help boost productivity.

Financial inclusion remained a core enabler of refugee self-reliance, driven by expanded partnerships with the International Finance Corporation and commercial banks, the scaling of blended finance mechanisms with the Grameen Crédit Agricole Foundation through new development finance partners, and initiatives supported by the African Development Bank to advance financial inclusion in Djibouti.

Durable solutions

In 2025, about 771,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin, mainly to Burundi, South Sudan and the Sudan, with smaller numbers returning to Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Somalia. Despite ongoing conflict, the Sudan became the largest country of return, with roughly 475,000 self-organized returns from Egypt, 209,000 from South Sudan, 33,000 from Chad, 2,500 from Libya and 1,000 from Ethiopia. South Sudan also received nearly 152,000 returnees from the Sudan, while 17,799 refugees were assisted to return to Burundi.

In 2026, the need for support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration will grow significantly, especially in countries facing economic crises and limited livelihood opportunities. UNHCR will continue advocating for support to strengthen resilience and area-based reintegration in high return areas.

Botswana has created a pathway to local integration for eligible refugees. In 2026, further work will focus on exploring alternative legal status options in selected countries, and on leveraging regional frameworks.

In 2025, UNHCR submitted 6,635 refugees for resettlement, surpassing the target of 5,397. More than 10,000 refugees departed to third countries through UNHCR programmes despite significant operational constraints. Refugees also accessed complementary pathways, such as private sponsorship, family reunification, employment, and education. As part of this work, the Emergency Transit Mechanism continued to evacuate vulnerable refugees from Libya to Rwanda. However, several States reduced or suspended their resettlement programmes in 2025 and 2026. Identifying refugees with the most urgent protection needs will remain a priority.

Statelessness

In 2025, Kenya advanced key reforms to its Citizenship and Immigration Act through a draft bill designed to close legislative gaps and address the exclusion of specific groups from nationality rights. If passed by Parliament, the bill would represent an important milestone for statelessness prevention. Communities at risk of statelessness also developed community-generated registers to support evidence-based advocacy. In Eswatini, with UNHCR support, the Government has put in place an ambitious national action plan to prevent statelessness.

In 2026, UNHCR will focus on supporting States to implement their pledges made at the Global Refugee Forums, advance legislative reforms and resolve specific statelessness situations in priority countries.

Risk management

Across the region, UNHCR faced a difficult risk environment, driven by funding constraints, restructuring and growing humanitarian pressures. Rising displacement, insecurity and widening service gaps increased operational and protection risks, while reduced staffing and field presence limited oversight and timely mitigation.

In response, UNHCR strengthened mitigation efforts, reinforcing fraud prevention and fiduciary controls through staff training, stricter standard operational procedures, and greater regional oversight. Several offices, including in Mozambique, the Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania updated fraud and corruption frameworks. In 2026, the region will prioritize staff well-being through the rollout of the psychosocial risk management process.

Efficiency and reform

A series of targeted efficiency and reform initiatives to strengthen operational sustainability while safeguarding protection outcomes included the consolidation of UNHCR Nairobi offices into a purpose-built carbon-neutral facility within the United Nations Office complex. The move has improved integration with United Nations shared services and generated significant cost savings. Programmatic efficiencies, including streamlined protection registration systems, the integration of refugees into national education and health systems, expanded cash-based interventions and rationalizing water, sanitation and hygiene and supply chain modalities have generated multi-million-dollar savings while improving service quality, accountability and sustainability.

C. Financial information

In October 2025, the Executive Committee at its seventy-sixth session, adopted a budget of \$1,981 million for 2026 for the Eastern and Southern Africa region. The breakdown of requirements by impact area for 2026 is: attaining favourable protection environments (\$448 million); realizing rights in safe environments (\$1,016 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$349 million); and securing solutions (\$170 million). As of 31 January 2026, 15 per cent of the region's financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. In 2026, UNHCR will continue to explore alternative sources of funding, including from development and private partners to address the needs in the region.