

95th Standing Committee | 24 March 2026

Update for the Eastern and Southern Africa Region

Mamadou Dian Balde, Director

*Mister Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Nearly one year ago, I sat before you in a sombre state, acknowledging the significant challenges of the previous year for the millions of refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons we serve in our region; for hosting governments and communities; for partners; and for my own humanitarian colleagues. You have received this year's written update, which provides a more detailed overview of the current challenges the region faces and the progress we are making, so I would like to highlight just a few points in this oral update.

Since we last met, we have merged the East, Horn and Great Lakes Regional Bureau with that in Southern Africa, incorporating 14 additional countries into the new Bureau for Eastern and Southern Africa. Unfortunately, while the scope and needs in the region have increased, our funding and capacity have been significantly reduced: in 2026, the reconfigured Bureau operates with 69.5% less human resource capacity, while staffing in Country Operations in the region has been reduced by 48% average. Emergency and high-risk operations have not been spared. We have also nationalized several representations previously led by international staff. **Yet, we and our partners are resilient and are doing our part, inspired by the resilience shown by refugees and host communities who, despite major funding cuts and drastically reduced services, are standing and are doing their best.**

Distinguished Delegates,

Three years on, **Sudan** sadly remains the world largest driver of forced displacement. While some areas of the country are more stable, the past six months have seen an increase of atrocities and massive violations of human rights, particularly in the Darfur and Kordofan States. Inside Sudan, there are nearly 7 million people who have been forced to leave their homes since the beginning of this brutal conflict and remain displaced. Nearly 4.5 million have crossed into mostly neighboring

countries, with some moving even further away. At the same time, we have seen 850,000 Sudanese refugees make the difficult decision to return home, under less-than-ideal circumstances – determined to try and rebuild their lives.

Sudan is not the only complex and escalating emergency in the region, unfortunately. Renewed violence in **South Sudan** is forcing a new wave of tens of thousands of refugees to cross into **Ethiopia**. Violence combined with catastrophic flooding in **Mozambique** is creating additional internal displacement. Fighting in **Eastern DRC** had led yet another large influx of refugees to **Burundi**, where a lack of space and severe funding cuts have increased protection risks for new arrivals.

Distinguished Delegates,

It is understandable if you feel that many of the challenges I am detailing today sound like a retread of previous years. But there is a difference. I said last year that these challenges, while daunting, are not insurmountable. I can confidently say that for every continuing and new problem, through working closely with governments, development actors, NGOs, private sector, our UN partners and forcibly displaced themselves, we have equally advanced progress on finding solutions.

How are we doing this?

First, we have continued to scale up our engagement with International Financial Institutions and development partners, such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and European Union INTPA, as indicated by the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations few minutes ago. This is to ensure that development support works hand in hand with humanitarian interventions, as we are witnessing in **Uganda**. This priority remains crucial in progressing our “solutions from the start” emergency response approach, to improve the lives of those displaced and the communities hosting them and to prevent as much as possible humanitarian dependency by increasing self-reliance.

Second, we are closely partnering with governments who, despite challenges of their own, continue to open their borders and to champion progressive policies, such as mainstreaming refugee services into national plans, transforming protracted refugee camps into settlements and even municipalities, and addressing decades long RSD backlogs. We are seeing real tangible progress with the implementation of **Kenya’s** Shirika Plan, with **Rwanda’s** strategy to enable 50 per cent of refugees to achieve self-reliance by 2030, with **Ethiopia’s**

Makatet Strategy, and with **South Africa**'s efforts to reform its refugee system, to cite few examples. **Botswana** and **Namibia** have also agreed on transition plans with UNHCR and partners to assume assistance and social protection for refugees living in settlements. We know that the journey towards inclusion results in better protection and is also more efficient, as we are witnessing in **Zambia**, as well; ending parallel systems and drawing on the greatest resource – human capital.

Third, we are scaling up the search for durable solutions in the region. The promotion of voluntary repatriation to Burundi from refugee-hosting countries continues, despite challenges and the country's limited capacity to absorb large numbers of returnees. Last week, we co-convened in Nairobi, Kenya, a regional Ministerial Meeting on Comprehensive Solutions for Burundi refugees, with seven governments and a dozen partners, including IFIs and refugee representatives. The finalization and implementation of the comprehensive solutions roadmap will help the conclusion of a protracted refugee situation, through solutions. This initiative is part of the implementation of the High Commissioner's vision towards solutions and reduction on humanitarian aid and will be followed by additional initiatives for other refugee populations across the region.

Fourth, we are further strengthening our coordination and collaboration with sister UN agencies, increasing efficiencies. I will soon be entering my fourth year as the Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Sudan situation, working with 123 partners responding to the needs of Sudanese sisters and brothers across 7 countries [In February, we launched the RRP appeal for \$1.6 billion and count on your support, for financing it]. We are co-locating offices with **UNICEF** in South Africa, saving 43% in administrative costs; are working with **WFP and FAO** on joint programming focused on refugee resilience and self-reliance; and with **IOM** on the Route Based Approach and returns in Sudan. We are also stepping up the **interoperability of our data systems**. With WFP, SCOPE pulls beneficiary data directly from UNHCR's registration system for food distribution in Tanzania, eliminating duplication and accelerating delivery. This is the true spirit of the Secretary General's **UN 80 Initiative**.

My last point before ending is the deepening of community-based approaches and localization, including through Refugee Led Organizations. In 2025, we scaled up delivery of services by organizations led by refugees and internally displaced persons, by nearly doubling the number of grant agreements, from 60 to 112 in the region. This trajectory will continue in 2026, and beyond.

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To end, I wish to thank all partners for your support to sisters and brothers in the region. The challenges **are** many, and, again, not insurmountable. UNHCR and partners are committed to saving lives, to advance self-reliance and solutions, which all contribute to stability and greater opportunities for communities to thrive. We will keep doing our part, despite reduced capacities, and count on you to do your part as well, in the true spirit of responsibility sharing, including your scaled up advocacy for peace, and your financial, political and technical support for protection and solutions.

Thank you.