

94th Meeting of the Standing Committee - Regional Activities and Global Programmes

Regional update – West and Central Africa

Geneva, 24-27 March 2026

**Dear Chairperson,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

West and Central Africa continue to face complex and overlapping displacement crises driven by conflict, insecurity, adverse weather events and food shortages. By the end of 2026, the number of forcibly displaced and stateless people in the region is expected to rise to 23.1 million. Of these, 13.5 million are projected to be internally displaced, while 3.8 million are refugees and asylum-seekers.

The effects of the war in Sudan continue to reverberate across Chad and the Central African Republic. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has triggered new displacement within and beyond its borders. Across the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, insecurity continues to uproot families and place immense pressure on host communities and national systems.

Behind these figures are communities under immense strain, but also governments and host communities that continue to demonstrate remarkable solidarity. Across our region, states are providing land, infrastructure, social services, security and administrative support, often under severe fiscal and security pressure. These in-kind contributions are considerable and deserve greater recognition and stronger international support.

In the far north region in Cameroon, for example, more than 100 hectares of land have already been allocated in Minawao for refugee agriculture, with additional land expected. That is not simply a gesture of hospitality. It is a concrete investment in self-reliance, socio-economic resilience, social cohesion and more sustainable responses.

At the same time, needs are rising while humanitarian resources are shrinking sharply. In West and Central Africa, UNHCR operations have had to absorb significant budget reductions because of the overreliance on flexible fundings. In such a context, doing more of the same is neither realistic nor responsible.

We must therefore use every tool available to us. We must preserve Protection. We must support host countries more fairly. We must reduce dependency by expanding access to rights, local services and livelihoods. We must invest in host communities as partners in solutions. And we must work with governments, development actors, financial institutions and the private sector to move from repeated emergency response towards more sustainable and durable outcomes.

This is the direction of travel in West and Central Africa. It is ambitious, but necessary.

But let me be equally clear. This is not a move away from Protection. Protection remains the foundation of our Solutions work.

Without access to asylum, without Protection against refoulement, without documentation, without emergency response capacity, without Protection monitoring, and without action to prevent and respond to violence, especially violence against women and girls, there can be no meaningful inclusion, no credible self-reliance, and no durable solution.

This is especially important in a region where Protection risks remain acute. In Central Sahel, one in three households surveyed reported movement restrictions due to insecurity. Across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali and Niger, regional Protection monitoring continues to record serious Protection risks, including extortion, sexual violence, denial of resources and repeated displacement. These realities require us to preserve life-saving response capacities even as we strengthen pathways to solutions.

This is also true in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As peace efforts advance, Protection must remain central. Any progress towards returns or broader solutions must rest on voluntariness, clear information, legal safeguards, access to assistance, and conditions that allow returnees and internally displaced people to rebuild their lives in safety and dignity.

Dear Chairperson,

This more integrated approach is already taking shape across the region. In Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, prima facie recognition for Burkinabe asylum-seekers has helped preserve access to Protection. In Chad and Cameroon, efforts to include refugees in national education and health systems are advancing. In Niger and Senegal, legal and regulatory reforms have strengthened the framework for asylum and documentation.

This shift also depends on stronger partnership. Across the region, UNHCR is working with IOM on mixed movements and route-based responses, with WFP and other United Nations partners to connect Protection with food security, basic services and self-reliance, and with the World Bank, the African Development Bank and other international financial institutions to align displacement responses with national systems, resilience efforts and longer-term investment. We are also strengthening dialogue, data and joint analysis with host governments, UN partners, financial institutions and the private sector, because evidence is essential not only for Protection, planning and resource mobilisation, but also for speaking the language of development and investment, demonstrating results, and showing that displaced people are not only vulnerable, but also capable of contributing to the economies and communities that host them.

Localisation is also part of this shift. In 2025, nearly one third of UNHCR partnership agreements in the region were concluded with national and local organisations. We are now taking this further through a multi-year effort to strengthen more than 300 local, community-based and refugee-led organisations. This is an investment in local ownership, continuity and resilience.

At the same time, we continue to support voluntary returns where conditions allow, in safety and dignity. But returns must be sustainable. They require security, services, livelihoods and investment in areas of return. Otherwise, return risks becoming displacement once again.

The countries and communities of West and Central Africa are already carrying an extraordinary share of responsibility. Our task is to match their solidarity with sustained support, principled Protection and practical investment in solutions.

Thank you.