

## **Update on UNHCR operations in West and Central Africa**

### **A. Situation analysis, including new developments**

The West and Central Africa region faces complex forced displacement dynamics, driven primarily by conflict and insecurity, exacerbated by adverse weather events and food shortages. These factors are generating new humanitarian emergencies, prolonging existing displacement situations, and increasing pressure on national systems and host communities.

By the end of 2026, the number of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the region is expected to rise, from 22.1 million as of 31 December 2025, to 23.1 million. Significant increase in internal displacement is anticipated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria due to ongoing conflicts, while internal and cross-border movements in the Sahel region and the Sudan is expected to persist, with spillover effects into the Central African Republic and Chad.

At the end of 2025, there were 13.5 million internally displaced persons, 3.8 million refugees and asylum-seekers in the region, representing a 30 per cent increase compared to 2024, largely due to influxes from the Sahel region and the Sudan. In addition, there were 3.2 million returned internally displaced persons, 50,000 refugee returnees and an estimated 931,000 stateless persons in the region.

#### *The Sudan situation (the Central African Republic and Chad)*

As of 31 December 2025, Chad hosted nearly 1.5 million refugees, including 1.3 million Sudanese refugees, making it the primary country of asylum in West and Central Africa and Africa’s largest refugee hosting country per capita. Renewed fighting in the El Fasher region of the Sudan in October 2025 forced an estimated 26,000 people to flee into eastern Chad, bringing the total Sudanese arrivals in 2025 to more than 180,000 and to 900,000 since the onset of the crisis in April 2023. The scale and pace of arrivals continue to place significant strain on national systems and highlight the need for early inclusion of refugees into national services and the importance of development-oriented responses.

Population flows from the Sudan to the Central African Republic have also continued, with 40,000 Sudanese refugees arriving since 2023.

#### *The Central African Republic situation*

With non-state armed groups still active in parts of the Central African Republic, some 429,000 people remain internally displaced, while 738,000 Central African refugees continue to live in neighbouring countries. In 2025, over 21,400 refugees returned to the Central African Republic, the highest number of returns recorded since 2017. These returns have been possible due to the recovery and reintegration efforts by the Government and the private sector with the support of UNHCR.

#### *The Democratic Republic of the Congo situation*

Amid diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, renewed conflict in South Kivu in December 2025 has led to over 500,000 people being internally displaced, while more than 236,000 have sought safety in neighbouring countries during the course of the year. As of 31 December 2025, there are 5.3 million internally

displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More than 1.2 million Congolese refugees remain in neighbouring countries.

#### *The Sahel Plus crisis*

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger continue to face persistent conflict and insecurity, driving forced displacement within their borders and into Mauritania and the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo which are together referred to as the Sahel Plus. As of 31 December 2025, the Sahel Plus region hosted 4.1 million forcibly displaced and stateless persons. This figure includes 3 million internally displaced persons, with nearly 70 per cent internally displaced in Burkina Faso and 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers. The refugee population in Mali doubled to 286,000 during 2025, including 56,000 new arrivals from Burkina Faso late in the year.

#### *The Lake Chad Basin situation*

The Lake Chad Basin continues to be impacted by extremism, intercommunal violence, and extreme weather events, driving forced displacement in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. It continues to host 343,000 refugees. By the end of 2025, Nigeria hosted 3.5 million internally displaced persons.

#### *Mixed movements*

While most forcibly displaced persons stayed in the region, onward movements of refugees and migrants along routes including those to Europe continued, with Chad, Mali, Niger and Senegal serving as key transit hubs. The Central Mediterranean Route remained the busiest in 2025 with 63,200 individuals crossing irregularly through Niger and onwards from Libya. An increase in Sudanese refugees transiting through Chad was also observed.

Arrivals along the West African Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands in Spain declined by 60 per cent in 2025, with 17,700 detections, compared to 47,000 in 2024, mainly involving nationals of Guinea, Mali and Senegal. As maritime controls and interceptions were strengthened by Mauritania and Senegal, a new pattern of departures emerged from Gambia.

#### *Protection risks*

Protection risks across the region remain acute, and are further exacerbated by significant funding shortfalls. A survey conducted by the regional inter-agency protection monitoring system with 82,000 households and 53,000 individuals, including community leaders and local authorities in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger revealed that one in three households in the Central Sahel faced movement restrictions due to insecurity, limiting their access to essential services, livelihoods opportunities and heightening risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. Violence against women and girls accounted for one in five protection incidents, with a fivefold increase in denial of resources, deepening their vulnerabilities.

#### *UNHCR response to forced displacement in the region*

Operations in the region continue to be impacted by a 25 per cent reduction in budget in 2025, which was further reduced to 51 per cent by January 2026. As a result, operations reprioritized activities, realigned strategies, and pursued efficiencies to ensure the continued delivery of protection, assistance, and solutions to forcibly displaced populations.

UNHCR focuses on prioritizing immediate protection needs, strengthening emergency preparedness and response, while simultaneously laying the foundation for longer-term solutions, such as accelerating the inclusion of refugees within government services and working closely with partners to provide opportunities for economic self-reliance.

The strategic shift to delivering protection with a clear pathway to solutions is anchored in the following six transitions from: 1) short-term emergency responses to self-reliance and resilience from the outset, 2) individual assistance to community-based approaches, 3) in-kind to cash-based responses, 4) humanitarian delivery to development and peace interventions; 5) international implementation to national and local leadership, and 6) country by country action to spillover-aware regional approaches.

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

### *Attaining favourable protection environments*

In 2025, UNHCR advocacy with the Government of Ghana resulted in granting prima facie recognition to Burkinabe asylum-seekers, while Côte d'Ivoire extended the same recognition to Burkinabe and Malian asylum-seekers, removing immediate barriers to asylum and ensuring access to protection for new arrivals. Nigeria extended temporary legal protection to 12,000 Cameroonians and implemented simplified refugee status determination procedures for refugees from Niger.

UNHCR supported 17 countries in finalizing their asylum capacity development road maps. They are two-year action plans anchored in the 2025-2030 UNHCR Strategic Approach to Strengthening National Asylum Systems. The road maps reflect a shift towards sustained national and local leadership for the improvement of the protection environment for refugees.

Niger issued an implementing decree in December 2025 which clarified the framework governing the entry, residence and documentation of non-nationals, including for those individuals that fall under the mandate of UNHCR. This represents a significant step forward in enhancing refugee protection, considering key legal safeguards.

In September 2025, Senegal issued implementing decrees to operationalize its asylum law, clarifying asylum procedures, modernizing biometric documentation, and reinforcing key safeguards, including family reunification and the protection of unaccompanied children.

Mali strengthened the protection of stateless persons through the adoption of a law granting them equal rights to access health care, education, employment, housing and justice as its nationals.

By the end of 2025, approximately 934,000 people in the region remained without individual registration, largely as a result of funding constraints resulting in reduced staffing capacity and registration missions. This figure included 440,000 refugees in Chad, 120,000 in Niger and 107,000 in Mali.

The Lomé Dialogue brought together the Governments of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo to strengthen refugee protection while addressing growing security concerns in West Africa. It culminated in the signing of the Lomé Declaration in July 2025. The agreement commits the five countries to upholding international protection standards, improving refugee inclusion and social cohesion to support local development, and enhancing cross-border coordination, particularly in preparation for voluntary return and reintegration. The five States have subsequently developed a subregional protection and solutions strategy for 2026-2030, underlining progress towards regional cooperation in responding to cross-border impacts of crises, particularly conflict, insecurity, and displacement.

In the context of mixed movements, UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration provided support to the Governments of Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal to implement a route-based approach, by mapping protection services along the Central Mediterranean and West African Atlantic routes, and improving coordination of services for people on the move, including access to asylum. Multipurpose hubs were set up to provide protection and safe alternatives to dangerous journeys. The endorsement of the approach by Governments and their requests to digitalize and decentralize asylum services, presents an important opportunity to scale up the approach while reinforcing national ownership.

### *Realizing rights in safe environments*

UNHCR strengthened emergency preparedness, risk management and response, through collaboration with the eCentre for Africa programme, providing training in critical emergency response to 37 local and national organizations from 16 countries which are at high risks of emergencies.

UNHCR transitioned from provision of in-kind assistance to cash assistance, offering refugees greater choice, flexibility and dignity in meeting their urgent needs. Multi-purpose cash was provided to 30,000 refugees in Cameroon, 27,500 refugees in eastern Democratic Republic of

the Congo, and 2,000 refugees in Niger. In Mali, 2,700 essential item kits were distributed to newly arrived Burkinabe refugees in San and Koro in the Mopti region.

UNHCR prioritized community-based approaches and scaled up survivor-centred care for the prevention and response to violence against women and girls, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where incidence levels remain high. In Chad, all identified survivors amongst the newly-arrived Sudanese refugees received psychosocial support, in addition to engaging 101,000 people in community-based prevention and protection activities. In Mali, UNHCR distributed 400 dignity kits to refugee women and girls.

In eastern Chad, UNHCR relocated 600,000 Sudanese refugees from the Sudanese border to 11 expanded sites and nine new settlements by January 2026 while over 240,000 refugees remained in high-risk border areas. UNHCR combined emergency protection with measures to foster inclusion of refugees in national systems, reflecting a “solutions from the start” approach to address immediate and longer-term needs. UNHCR advocated for the integration of refugee schools into the national education system, including the recruitment of 3,000 refugee teachers and the construction of over 1,300 classrooms. Ongoing discussions with the Government aim to deploy additional Chadian teachers and to integrate qualified refugee teachers into the national payroll.

In Burkina Faso, UNHCR and the National Refugee Commission identified 9,000 displaced children for education assistance and enrolled 6,000 in schools. The Government offered 160 higher-education scholarships to refugees and internally displaced persons. In Niger, UNHCR advocated for and provided technical support for the drafting and ongoing adoption of the National Strategy for Inclusion of Displaced Children (2025–2030).

In Cameroon, UNHCR advocated for the enrolment of 93,000 refugees into the national health insurance programme. In Chad, UNHCR supported 500 Sudanese refugee health professionals, including 52 doctors, by gaining government recognition for their qualifications and integrating them into the national health system. In Burkina Faso, 234 refugees were enrolled in community-based health insurance schemes.

UNHCR provided shelter for 80,000 displaced persons and vulnerable host communities in Burkina Faso and 24,000 in Cameroon. In eastern Chad, over 25,500 shelters were constructed, yet significant gaps persist due to limited funding, leaving 71,300 households without adequate shelter. In Mali, the construction of 750 shelters in Koro in the Mopti region, freed up schools previously used to host Burkinabe refugees to resume educational activities. In Nigeria, the ongoing Banki shelter project in Borno State aims to assist 450 refugee families upon completion.

#### *Empowering communities and achieving gender equality*

UNHCR supported several government-led initiatives advancing inclusion and livelihoods in coastal states. In Ghana, the Refugee Agribusiness and Sustainability Programme supported climate-resilient farming and related livelihood activities for 20,000 refugees, primarily from Burkina Faso, while in Togo, agribusiness opportunities were provided to refugees by the AVENIR initiative.

In Chad, UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the Government implemented the Haguina project, which aims to rehabilitate 100,000 hectares of agricultural land for 10,000 vulnerable families, 80 per cent of whom are refugees.

In Nigeria, UNHCR set up solar-powered irrigation schemes in Cross River, Katsina and Borno States for 40 refugee and host community cooperatives to sustain their agricultural production.

In Niger, agriculture and vocational training was provided to more than 7,600 individuals living in the “opportunity villages” and sites hosting refugees from Mali and Nigeria. Opportunity villages in southern Niger are a refugee hosting model designed by the Government and UNHCR, together with local leaders, as a sustainable alternative to traditional refugee camps. In Burkina Faso, improved agriculture initiatives enhanced self-reliance for 840 people forcibly displaced and vulnerable host communities.

UNHCR improved community-led responses by dedicating 60 per cent of project partnerships in the region to local actors in 2025. Over 1,900 refugee-led and community-based organizations were identified and UNHCR will collaborate with 150 of them.

*Partnerships with development actors*

Through the application of a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, UNHCR deepened partnerships with development actors for early alignment of programmes with national development plans. For example, in Chad, water spreading weirs, which harness floodwater, are helping boost agricultural productivity, while allowing refugees and host communities to manage natural resources responsibly. Alternatives to camps in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Niger are promoting inclusion, through the provision of social services and livelihood opportunities benefitting both forcibly displaced and host communities.

UNHCR strengthened collaboration with partners, including the African Development Bank through engagement with the African Resilience Forum, and the World Bank to include refugees into social protection projects. In the Central African Republic, Mali and Nigeria, the Islamic Development Bank provided support for livelihoods and basic services through the Global Islamic Fund for Refugees.

In December 2025, 100 government officials, 15 refugees and refugee-led organizations from the region participated in the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review, showcasing good practices in advancing solutions. The event also marked the launch of the States-developed Gulf of Guinea Sub-regional Protection and Solutions Strategy, aimed at strengthening humanitarian response and promoting resilience-building, development, and solutions.

*Securing solutions*

UNHCR advanced solutions to address protracted displacement situations through the voluntary repatriation of 50,000 refugees in the region, including 21,400 returning to the Central African Republic. Since 2017, a total of 74,000 Central Africans have returned with a further 60,000 expected to return in 2026. These returns are supported by the Central African Republic Solutions Support Platform. The growing interest in voluntary returns is driven by strengthened political commitment, improved security conditions, peace agreements, and the restoration of essential services and governance structures.

Returns from the Democratic Republic of the Congo included 7,000 refugees to the Central African Republic, 7,000 to Rwanda, and 3,500 to Burundi. With the ongoing peace processes such as the Washington Agreement and the Doha Framework for a Comprehensive Peace Agreement, planned voluntary returns of 10,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Rwanda are expected by the end of 2026. On the other hand, 780 Congolese refugees who were in neighbouring countries also returned home in 2025.

Government-organized voluntary returns to Nigeria comprised 26,700 refugees from Chad and Niger, often in difficult conditions. UNHCR continues to advocate for legal frameworks to guarantee voluntary, safe and dignified returns, including operationalization of tripartite agreements with Chad and Nigeria in 2025, and the signing of a tripartite agreement with Niger and Nigeria to ensure safer returns to Nigeria.

In 2025, more than 3.2 million internally displaced persons across the region returned, according to government estimates, including 3 million internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 153,000 in Mali and 74,000 in the Central African Republic.

UNHCR collaborated with governments and development partners to develop return areas for sustainable reintegration of returnees. In the Central African Republic, 10 development hubs were identified for the provision of essential services and self-reliance opportunities. These include the Baoro development hub in Nana-Mambéré prefecture, where UNHCR is building schools, health facilities, and supporting agricultural activities for returnees and the local community. These initiatives, however, will require significant and sustained investment from all relevant partners.

Resettlement opportunities declined in 2025, with the regional resettlement quota reduced by 64 per cent compared to 2024. A total of 1,863 individuals departed to 11 countries: 1,823 through resettlement and 40 through complementary pathways.

**C. Financial information**

In 2025, the Executive Committee at its seventy-sixth session, adopted a budget of \$1,259 million for 2026 for the West and Central Africa region, a 14 per cent decrease from 2025 and reflecting a shift to protection and durable solutions. The breakdown of requirements by impact area is: attaining favourable protection environments (\$348 million); realizing rights in safe environments (\$396 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality ( \$284 million); and securing solutions (\$231 million). As of 31 January 2026, 19 per cent of the region's 2026 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.