

UNHCR Morocco's response to the COVID-19 situation

June 2020

In response to the COVID-19 situation, the Government of Morocco has taken early and decisive public health measures. In parallel, national response schemes have been developed in support to the population at large living in Morocco, focusing on the health sector as well as the formal and informal sectors of the economy. In support of, and complementary to these measures, **UNHCR rapidly adapted its operational posture to respond to the increasing protection and assistance needs of refugees and asylum seekers** in the context of confinement and loss of daily incomes. **As of 31 May 2020, UNHCR had registered 11,149 persons of concern, including 7,306 refugees and 3,843 asylum seekers.**

To better respond to these growing needs, UNHCR, in close coordination with its partners, has taken the following measures:

Communication with communities and identification of protection needs:

In order to stay in close contact with refugees and asylum seekers despite movement restrictions, **UNHCR immediately strengthened its communication with communities** in two respects: to ensure continuous identification of protection needs and vulnerabilities; and to inform on measures taken for the continuity of UNHCR and partner services. A Refugee Protection Call Centre, with five hotlines in three languages (Arabic, French and English) was immediately established, through which **1,150 protection counselling sessions have been conducted since the 19 March**. Two additional phone numbers are dedicated to registration and refugee status determination related matters, through which **400 requests from asylum seekers were responded to**. Furthermore, one additional phone number is specifically used for emergencies (arrests, follow-up of access to movement authorizations etc.) **Key information is also shared directly through text message**

with refugees (some 7,500 messages per information notification) and shared with UNHCR's implementing and operational partners. **UNHCR also relies on 22 community agents** to identify protection needs and disseminate information within refugee communities. To ensure wide access to information, key messages are shared on social media: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Protection Working Groups in Oujda, Tangier and Casablanca, supported by UNHCR through its partner the Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH), **play a key role in strengthening humanitarian assistance coordination and advocacy for the inclusion of refugee and migrant populations in governmental and non-governmental assistance programs**. Virtual meetings are also held on a regular basis.

Continuity of access to documentation and asylum procedures:

Exceptional procedures have been set-up to ensure continuous access to asylum procedures for any person contacting UNHCR. **Referral of newly arrived individuals to Morocco by UNHCR's partner are pursued remotely and nearly 250 individuals have been referred to UNHCR by OMDH Oujda since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Pre-registration of more than 270 asylum seekers was carried out remotely.**

Recently recognized refugees during UNHCR's refugee status determination procedures receive their official documents electronically. UNHCR guarantees the continued validity of expired documentation with partners and national authorities, and removes the need for refugees to leave their homes for documentation renewal purposes.

Financial assistance programme:

In response to the increasing number of testimonies of extreme precarity received from refugees, UNHCR temporarily adapted its financial assistance programme. Vulnerable refugees benefiting from financial assistance continued to be assisted throughout the crisis. In addition, and in spirit of solidarity which must prevail in the current dire situation, every refugee registered with UNHCR benefitted from financial assistance in April. Another round of assistance was exceptionally issued

to all refugees in May following the announcement of the extension of the lockdown until the 10 June. **Over 3.000 families benefited from financial assistance each month.**

To implement these urgent measures, UNHCR had to re-evaluate its programme and reallocate conditional cash assistance for education and professional training for the month of April and May towards this solidarity intervention.

In the absence of new funding, UNHCR will not have the capacity to renew this exceptional assistance beyond May.

Continuity of health services:

UNHCR ensures, in coordination with its medical partner, the Moroccan Association for Family Planning (AMPF), the continuity of its medical assistance for refugees. Persons suffering from chronic diseases have received their medication supplies for two months in AMPF's health centres or directly at their doorstep. New medical consultation procedures have been set-up and physical and remote presence is ensured in some partners' centres. Four medical hotlines have also been established and communicated to refugees for online consultations. **Nearly 550 consultations have been carried out since the beginning of the lockdown, 300 of which were**

conducted remotely and nearly 250 in-person. The medical partner also works on sensitization of refugees on COVID-19 prevention.

In addition to access to national health centres granted to refugees by the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA), **UNHCR signed a partnership agreement on the 20 May 2020 with the National Council of Physicians Order (CNOM). The agreement focuses on facilitating access to medication, mental health and specialized care for refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco.**

Psycho-social support and monitoring of vulnerable refugees:

Protection counselling sessions organized by UNHCR and its partner (FOO) in charge of psycho-social assistance are now done remotely. These sessions allow the continued identification of refugees' specific needs, to provide support through financial assistance, individual psycho-social support or referral to another partner. In this regard, **FOO's two psychologists remotely conducted 110 therapy sessions in April, and social workers conducted over 1,100 counselling sessions between the beginning of the lockdown and early May, which benefited 720 refugees and 385 asylum seekers.**

Nearly 200 asylum seekers benefited from FOO's project SOS Migrants to support their most basic needs. About fifteen meetings of the monitoring committee for vulnerable cases (composed of UNHCR and FOO members) and a monitoring committee of victims of sexual and gender-based violence have been organized remotely since the beginning of the crisis to ensure timely response to refugees' needs. Individual monitoring actions requiring physical presence have been temporarily suspended due to movement restrictions.

Access to education:

A survey of refugee students was conducted by UNHCR's partner, FOO, to evaluate access to the Ministry of National Education's services and to identify the challenges for the continuity of children's education during COVID-19. This survey highlighted that over 70 per cent of refugees enrolled in

school before the crisis are still pursuing their classes through online, distance learning. DAFI students arranged remote support courses for children with learning difficulties. The main challenge remains the lack of access to smartphones, tablets, televisions and internet data packages.

Socio-economic integration:

To continue its socio-economic integration programme, UNHCR's partner, the Moroccan Association for Support and Promotion of Small Businesses (AMAPPE) ensures the continuity of its activities remotely: reception, competency evaluation, orientation, grading and validation committees, feasibility studies. However, professional and employability trainings have had to be postponed. AMAPPE monitors persons of concern who have lost their jobs or whose income generating activities are in distress due to the COVID-19 crisis (formal and

informal sector), to then reinforce the advocacy for integration of refugees in national for socio-economic support plans.

UNHCR is working in close collaboration with the High Commissioner for Planning (HCP) to conduct a study on the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on refugees. A sample of 600 households has been prepared, the questionnaire finalized, with data collection to begin shortly.

Immediate additional funding requirements:

To enable UNHCR and its partners' to comprehensively respond to refugees and asylum-seekers needs throughout the COVID-19 crisis, UNHCR Morocco requires USD 1.2 million. Despite a reallocation exercise undertaken by the operation,

in order to ensure the continuity of UNHCR's response to the most urgent needs of refugees and asylum seekers during the COVID-19 crisis and during the recovery phase, UNHCR needs some additional USD 975,000.

Financial assistance	700,000 USD
Healthcare assistance	150,000 USD
Livelihood support	125,000 USD
Total prioritized and uncovered needs	975,000 USD