

UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa

COVID-19 Emergency Response Update #15

17 February 2021

Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, Yemen, and Turkey

Key Figures



20

out of 20 UNHCR countries / operations are reporting COVID-19 cases in the region



17.4 million

2021 planning figure for people of concern in the Middle East and North Africa



5,654

cases of COVID-19 reported among persons of concern¹ including fatalities since March 2020

Regional Developments

The COVID-19 pandemic is entering its second year, with border closures likely to continue to affect access to asylum and territory across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. At present, there are 14 countries where COVID-19 related restrictions on entry apply, without exceptions in law or practice that allow for entry by asylum-seekers or person in need of international protection. Three countries, Egypt, Lebanon and Mauritania, apply restrictions with exceptions for asylum-seekers.

UNHCR's [COVID-19 live platform](#) is an evidence-based tool to support Governments and partners, and to enable sound policy and decision-making during the pandemic and its aftermath.



Nizar, 25, a Syrian refugee searches for work on building sites in Amman, Jordan. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic he never received any assistance from UNHCR. Since March 2020, however, he says he has barely been able to find 10 days a month of construction work compared to the 25 he was working before. In December 2020, he received emergency COVID-19 cash assistance from UNHCR to help him pay his rent and cover some debts.
© UNHCR/Lilly Carlisle

Main Lines of Response



Continuing, adapting, and delivering protection and assistance to the most vulnerable



Strengthening communication with communities



Prioritizing immediate interventions to prevent infections and supporting access to services and materials



Advocating for the inclusion of refugees, IDPs and other marginalized groups into national public health and other responses, and supporting national systems to deliver assistance



Empowering individuals and families to make the best decisions for themselves, through cash-based assistance

¹ The breakdown of confirmed COVID-19 cases since March 2020 is as follows: Algeria (40), Egypt (41), Iraq (606), Jordan (2,218), Lebanon (2,734), Mauritania (9), and Yemen (6). The change in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among UNHCR persons of concern in MENA is a result of increased monitoring across Operations, and not necessarily indicative of a rise in COVID-19 transmissions.

Highlights from the Field

In **Iraq**, at the start of 2021, COVID-19 cases rose at a slightly lower rate than in previous months, with a regular average of 785 daily cases in comparison to an average of 1,300 during December 2020. Initial reports indicate that with the increasing number of tests being conducted, the number of COVID-19 cases across the country continues to decrease, showing a positive trend during January 2021.

In 2021, UNHCR in Iraq aims to target a total of 82,726 households (52,440 Syrian households, 7,201 refugees and asylum-seeker households, and 23,085 IDP and returnee families). The assistance would be delivered in the form of cash to cover household and personal hygiene needs related to the COVID-19 response.

While the daily number of new COVID-19 cases in **Jordan** has been decreasing since the end of November, the last week of January saw a slight increase, also in the positivity rate. In total, 329,194 cases have been recorded in the country, out of which 8,418 are currently active and 4,334 have died. Cases among refugees in camps remain below the national average, with 1.8 per cent of the refugee population testing positive compared to 3.2 per cent of the total Jordanian population. As of early February, there were no active cases in Azraq camp.

In **Lebanon**, due to the significant surge in COVID-19 cases after the December holiday period and the growing saturation of intensive care unit (ICU) beds across the country (particularly in Beirut), the Government issued a decision on 4 January for a complete lockdown as of 7 January, and subsequently declared a state of health emergency with strict full-time curfews imposed. Social unrest and protests erupted in Tripoli, one of the poorest cities in Lebanon, as a result of the strict measures.

Due to the national lockdown, several of UNHCR activities were impacted. UNHCR's border monitoring teams did not conduct any border missions and resettlement selection missions could not take place in January, affecting more than 100 individuals. Detention monitoring and follow-up on cases at detention facilities continued remotely due to movement restrictions. Urgent medical and legal needs and the provision of core relief items continued.

While works for phase 2 of the hospital expansion plans are still ongoing, a total of 197 hospital beds and 67 ICU beds were installed and operational in January. UNHCR Lebanon has worked on fast-tracking the deployment of the remaining hospital/ICU beds and completed the distribution plan for phase 3 of the hospital expansion plan. This plan includes an additional 143 regular hospital beds and 27 ICU beds, scheduled for delivery to the targeted hospitals during the first week of February.

In **Syria**, during January, approximately 25,000 beneficiaries received support provided by 14 functioning primary health clinics and 31 health points assisted by UNHCR across ten governorates. Additionally, 380 oxygen cylinders were delivered to hospitals in coordination with the Ministry of Health. Meanwhile, as part of the Government's measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, the Syrian Telecommunication Company initiated online services for citizens to receive documentation related to civil events, housing and land, among others.

In **Algeria**, as of the last week of January 2021, the UNHCR-supported Identification Centre located in Rabouni became operational to issue identity cards, passports and driving licences for Sahrawi refugees. Despite ongoing mobility restrictions in Algeria, 17 refugees departed for resettlement. Other departures are expected in the coming weeks, including for refugees whose travel had been cancelled last year due to COVID-19 border closures and restrictions.

In light of the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in **Egypt**, UNHCR's in-office activities remain limited to a number of essential activities related to registration, resettlement and some protection services. Meanwhile in January, UNHCR started remodelling its interview rooms in its Cairo locations to significantly increase the numbers served, including with document renewal and registration of newly arrived asylum-seekers. For the implementation of Egypt's multi-purpose cash assistance in 2021, 633 households were remotely re-assessed during the month of January to determine their eligibility and as part of ongoing UNHCR vulnerability assessments.



Resumption of cards renewal activities despite COVID-19. Syrian refugees in Alexandria, Egypt, are receiving their renewed cards despite the on-going situation of COVID-19, as part of their legal protection. This step helps avoiding arrests due to cards and/or residency expiry.
© UNHCR/Mina Shehata

In **Libya**, UNHCR's food parcel distributions continued in coordination with the World Food Programme (WFP) during January. Some 2,450 refugee and asylum-seeker families in Misrata, Al Zawiya and Zwara received food parcels to help them cope with economic impacts caused by COVID-19. These distributions are in addition to some 12,500 families who received food parcels during the second half of 2020 since the launch of the UNHCR-WFP Programme.

Furthermore, UNHCR and partners are providing ongoing support to the health system across Libya in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. On 26 January, UNHCR handed over six fully equipped ambulances and three ICU ventilators to health authorities in Eastern Libya. Additionally, UNHCR's partner installed four containers at four health centres in Benghazi, benefitting some 9,250 patients, including returnees and refugees.

In **Mauritania**, under the framework of the African Bank of Development/UNHCR/G5 Sahel tripartite agreement aimed at easing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees and their host communities in the Sahel, UNHCR handed over hygienic and disinfection products to the Governor in Nema (Hodh Chargui) on 17 January. The distribution forms part of a larger donation from UNHCR of hygiene, medical and laboratory equipment, personal protective equipment and medicines for a total amount of more than USD 1.3 million

In **Tunisia**, in line with COVID-19 restrictions and UN Country Team recommendations, most group activities for refugees and asylum-seekers were suspended during January or conducted with reduced presence. Nevertheless, UNHCR's core protection activities such as case management, registration, refugee status determination and resettlement continued. During January, UNHCR also commenced the distribution of hygiene materials to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in various municipalities hosting high numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, namely in Sfax, Raoued and Ariana (Grand Tunis).

In **Israel**, the Ministry of Health continues to monitor cases of infection among people of concern and provide free testing. Due to the lockdown, the Ministry of Interior's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Unit has been working remotely on their backlog of cases and not conducting RSD interviews. The Registration Unit in Bnei Brak is also closed to the public. Visa renewals for Eritreans and Sudanese continue to be done automatically. New asylum-seekers continue submit applications via the online RSD form and receive SMS notifications with a date and time for their appointment at Bnei Brak, after which the registration process can be completed once lockdown is lifted.

In **Yemen**, the virus continues to spread mostly undetected in more impoverished communities. In particular, refugees and asylum-seekers are at heightened risk due to their dire living and sanitary conditions, hindered access to health facilities, and increasing stigma associated with the virus. The lack of preventive measures applied countrywide as well as the limited possibility for most displaced individuals to stay at home due to the lack of financial means and need to generate income, puts them at greater risk. With the pandemic reducing livelihoods and disrupting food supplies, the scale and impact of food insecurity is expected to increase. During January, UNHCR continued to sensitize refugees, internally displaced Yemeni families as well as host communities on how to better protect themselves against COVID-19.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, UNHCR contributed a grant of some USD 12,000 to the Basmet Amal Alternative Education programme in Abu Dhabi. The grant will ensure that out of school children participating in the programme are able to continue learning remotely and that the centre continues its educational activities in line with COVID-19 restrictions.

Global Financial Requirements

UNHCR is grateful for the timely, generous, and flexible support of donors in 2020. **A total of USD 484.6 million (65 per cent) was contributed to the UNHCR Global Appeal 2020 out of USD 745.1 million required.**

UNHCR launched the [COVID-19 Supplementary Appeal 2021](#) appealing for an additional **USD 455 million** for activities in 2021 related to the exceptional socio-economic and protection impacts of COVID-19, as well as a limited number of critical health, WASH and shelter needs. As of 15 February, UNHCR's financial requirements for the Coronavirus Emergency are **5 per cent funded**, with **USD 22 million received**, of which **USD 2 million is for the MENA region**.

In total, UNHCR's financial requirements for COVID-19-related activities in 2021 will be approximately **USD 932 million** considering activities already mainstreamed into the Global Appeal, plus supplementary needs.

Contributed without restrictions on its use, unearmarked funding allows UNHCR critical flexibility in how best to reach refugees and other populations of concern who are in the greatest need and at the greatest risk.

Resources:

- [UNHCR's 2021 COVID-19 Supplementary Appeal](#)
- For MENA regional and country reports on COVID-19 response, please visit – [UNHCR Global Focus](#); [UNHCR Operational Portal \(Syria Regional Refugee Response\)](#); and [Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan website](#)
- Support UNHCR's COVID-19 preparedness and response plans: <https://giving.unhcr.org/en/coronavirus/>

For more details, please contact UNHCR MENA Regional Office in Amman (Jordan) at: MENAreporting@unhcr.org