
Update on UNHCR's operations in West and Central Africa

A. Situational overview

Overview

As of June 2021, there were 9.7 million persons of concern to UNHCR in 21 countries in the West and Central Africa region. The 9 per cent increase from the previous year is largely due to a rise in internal displacement, resulting in some 6.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the region. In central Sahel alone, there were more than 2 million IDPs by June 2021, out of whom the majority were in Burkina Faso (where 1.3 million were newly displaced).

In 2021, the region continued to grapple with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic which, in addition to directly impacting the health and well-being of populations, placed additional strain on fragile health systems and economies. Livelihood opportunities decreased, contributing to social tension, instability and onward movements. Persons of concern to UNHCR were included in national vaccination plans, and access to vaccines was facilitated through the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, with over 18,000 persons of concern vaccinated as of August 2021. UNHCR supported governments with sensitization activities to encourage vaccination and with prevention and response efforts. These included the procurement and distribution of medical equipment, capacity-building for government health workers and the delivery of ambulances to the Group of Five for the Sahel G5 (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) under a project financed by the African Development Bank (AfDB), targeting both host communities and refugees.

The security environment in the region remained fragile. Extremist groups continued to maintain a strong presence in the Mali–Niger–Burkina Faso tri-border area. Humanitarian workers and civilian populations were subject to violence by non-State armed groups. As the conflict spilled across borders beyond the Sahel, several hundred asylum-seekers fled to the northern regions of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.

In Côte d'Ivoire, increased social cohesion and national reconciliation offered reassurances of stability for Ivorian refugees and asylum-seekers. As a result, the Governments of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania and Togo, with the support of UNHCR, updated the roadmap for comprehensive solutions for Ivorian refugees, which is expected to culminate in the invocation of the cessation clause.¹

Main displacement situations

In 2021, the number of forcibly displaced persons in the region continued to increase, with refugees and IDPs reaching 1.4 million and 6.9 million respectively.

The Lake Chad Basin region was a major source of displacement due to rising numbers of incidents by extremist groups against civilians and humanitarian workers. By June 2021, the

¹ The cessation clause may be invoked in accordance with paragraphs 6 (A) (e) and (f) of the UNHCR Statute, Article 1C (5) and (6) of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and Article 1 (4) (e) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention. See <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3e637a202/guidelines-international-protection-3-cessation-refugee-status-under-article.html> for more details.

number of IDPs reached 3 million, including 2.2 million in North East Nigeria alone.

In Niger, following a government decision to close the Intikane site and suspend all humanitarian activities, the IDPs and some 20,000 Malian refugees were forced to move to several sites spread across 24 villages in Niger's Tahoua region. UNHCR strengthened its protection monitoring and community-based protection activities in order to continue to support these populations.

In the central Sahel, IDP numbers doubled since January 2020 (reaching some 2.3 million), overwhelming national response capacities and pushing more refugees from Burkina Faso into Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger. Forced displacement patterns evolved from short distance movements within rural areas to long distance displacements towards urban centres, creating additional strain on land availability, housing, public services and livelihood opportunities, and exposing the displaced to further protection risks such as forced labour, sexual exploitation, trafficking and discrimination.

Intercommunal conflict, armed attacks and other forms of violence escalated in Mali, causing the internal displacement of some 333,000 people and forcing 81,000 people to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. In the Central African Republic, military operations forced over 16,000 to seek refuge in the southern part of neighbouring Chad. More recently, intercommunal violence in neighbouring Cameroon led to the displacement of over 11,000 individuals into Chad. Emergency response measures were put in place to ensure an appropriate response for the IDPs in Cameroon and refugees in Chad.

B. Achieving the global strategic priorities

Voluntary repatriation

Voluntary returns to Côte d'Ivoire resumed in July 2021 and by early September, more than 3,000 Ivorian refugees had repatriated. Ministries of Health in Côte d'Ivoire and countries of asylum agreed on appropriate COVID-19 protocols for return, including rapid tests prior to departure. The reintegration of returnees was supported through cash grants provided by UNHCR, and further support was provided by the Government of Côte d'Ivoire in the areas of documentation, education, socioeconomic inclusion, land and the reintegration of civil servants.

Prospects for the resumption of voluntary return of refugees and the return of IDPs to several parts of the Central African Republic were reduced following deterioration of the security situation before and after the presidential elections held in December 2020. Humanitarian access remained a challenge amid new waves of displacement. As of mid-May 2021, the crisis had generated over 164,000 new IDPs and 123,000 new refugees.

As a result of a tripartite agreement signed between Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR, some 3,800 of the 5,000 refugees wishing to return from the Minawao camp in Cameroon to Borno State in North East Nigeria were repatriated. UNHCR established protection safeguards, ensured the voluntary character of return and provided accurate information on the situation in selected areas of return. Community-level post-return monitoring and engagement with the refugee returnees were also provided. In July 2021, Borno State representatives initiated talks with their counterparts in Diffa, Niger, to discuss the establishment of a similar return initiative. UNHCR is working with the concerned governments to establish a tripartite framework for the future voluntary repatriation of refugees from Niger to Nigeria.

Local integration

At the end of 2020, the Government of Ghana agreed to grant five-year residency permits to nearly 2,000 former Liberian refugees who had previously opted for local integration, providing them the opportunity to reside and work legally in the country. Discussions are under way on the possible issuance of longer-term residency permits and provision of other legal-stay arrangements for other groups of refugees.

The Government of Guinea-Bissau made progress in the implementation of its commitment to naturalize all remaining refugees in the country. Mobile teams issued national ID cards to the 7,000 refugees registered by UNHCR with the aim of completing this exercise by the end

of October 2021.

Resettlement

By the end of July 2021, the region had submitted the cases of over 760 refugees for resettlement, and more than 630 had departed. Four of the refugees obtained scholarships in France and were also confirmed for departure. Remote resettlement interviews continued in many operations, ensuring that submissions and departures could carry on while respecting COVID-19 protocols. Vulnerable cases were prioritized, and nearly 80 refugees with urgent or emergency protection needs were put forward for resettlement.

Promoting a favourable protection environment

UNHCR provided support and advice to the Government of Guinea to ensure full implementation of the 2018 asylum law, including the adoption of additional decrees related to local integration, and the issuance and renewal of documentation, such as modalities for the issuance of travel documents. The new asylum bill was adopted at a technical level and introduced into the country legislation process.

As part of the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum, the authorities of Niger undertook to reform a legislative and regulatory asylum framework. A technical committee was established in December 2020 to this end. UNHCR worked with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to promote the development of a regional refugee protection framework and model asylum law.

Protection against gender-based violence remained a priority across the region. UNHCR made efforts to scale up its programming in this area and dedicated 3.9 per cent of the 2021 spending allocation for the region to prevention and response activities to combat gender-based violence. UNHCR continued to focus on improving access and quality of related services offered to persons of concern and host communities. With funding from the Government of the United States of America under the Safe from the Start initiative, UNHCR ensured the dedicated support required.

Mixed movements

A re-emergence of the Western African Maritime Route was observed, with maritime channels being used in coastal countries to depart towards the Canary Islands. Partners recorded the arrival of some 23,000 refugees and migrants in over 700 boats in 2020, a stark increase from some 2,700 refugees and migrants in around 130 boats in 2019. In Mali, UNHCR established a mixed-movement monitoring programme with 57 monitors and a network of focal points working to identify refugees travelling in mixed movements, and referring and assisting people in vulnerable situations, while also building a picture of migration dynamics in the country.

To respond to heightened protection risks faced by children and youth in the region, UNHCR launched the “live, learn and participate” initiative and appeal (2021-2023), targeting 52,000 children and youth across Chad (25,000), Côte d’Ivoire (15,000) and Mali (12,000). The initiative seeks to enhance access to protection, education and livelihood opportunities, and strengthen national protection systems for children and youth on the move in the region.

UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) signed a joint letter to activate and guide the operationalization of the framework on identifying and protecting victims of trafficking in the region.

Internally displaced persons

The adoption of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) at the national level remained a priority. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR supported the creation of a technical committee in charge of the domestication of the Kampala Convention. Technical support was provided to the authorities in Cameroon in order to adopt the first draft bill on protection and assistance for IDPs.

In addition to a robust emergency and protection response to internal displacement, UNHCR continued to invest in data collection. The objective was to support national authorities with

the identification and enrolment of IDPs in order to strengthen their access to services and rights. UNHCR continued to bolster its cluster leadership (protection, shelter/non-food items and camp coordination and camp management). In Burkina Faso, through collective efforts led by UNHCR, the camp coordination and camp management cluster was activated.

Protection monitoring

Together with the Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR enacted the regional inter-agency protection monitoring tool, supporting coordination through joint advocacy and programming. Under Project 21, over 3,700 interviews were carried out across nearly 400 villages in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Data drawn from this project strengthened the identification of needs and prevention of protection risks for civilian populations during flight, as well as in host communities, enabling UNHCR to improve its programming in response to forced displacement. Still in its pilot stage, Project21 was expanded to include two more countries, Chad and Nigeria.

Operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees

Host countries in the region continued to receive support in their efforts to respond to forced displacement-related challenges, including from development actors such as the World Bank Group and the AfDB.

As of July 2021, over 140 pledges had been recorded for the region in the Global Compact on Refugees digital platform. Regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, continued to play a key role in the region to operationalize the Global Compact on Refugees. A four-year action plan is expected to be adopted by ECOWAS member States before the December 2021 high-level officials meeting.

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR engaged with the Economic Community for Central Africa States (ECCAS) to set up a support platform for solutions for the Central African Republic refugee situation. Some 700,000 refugees remain in asylum, mainly in neighbouring countries. A first high-level meeting to bring together ECCAS and relevant member States is expected to take place before the end of the year to review and endorse the proposed support platform.

C. Financial information

The 2021 budget approved for the region by the Executive Committee amounted to \$689.2 million. In 2021, the region received a supplementary budget of \$35.3 million for the COVID-19 response.

Financial requirements for the region stand at \$724.7 million. As of the end of July 2021, these needs were 54 per cent funded, with \$389 million in funds available, taking into consideration the preliminary allocations of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
