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

### **A. The forced displacement situation in West and Central Africa**

In 2019, there was a sharp rise in forced displacement in West and Central Africa. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached over 5 million by the end of the year, which represented an increase of over 30 per cent in 12 months. This upward trend was mainly due to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Burkina Faso and western Niger. There are fears that this situation will continue in 2020 as there are no immediate solutions in sight. The situation in the Central African Republic remained fragile, although the peace agreement signed in early 2019 gave rise to cautious hope and allowed for the voluntary return of a small number of IDPs and refugees. Extreme weather events related to climate change, are also adding to the challenges caused by ongoing conflicts and political tensions, particularly in the Sahel.

#### *The Sahel crisis*

The security situation in the central Sahel region deteriorated further and the number of people forcibly displaced rose significantly. Meanwhile access to populations of concern became more difficult, especially in the border triangle between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Insecurity affected Burkina Faso and reached its southern border, impacting some of the coastal countries, including Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. As of 14 February 2020, there were over 170,000 refugees and over 1,050,000 IDPs in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and western Niger. To address their growing needs, UNHCR and its partners scaled up activities and increased coordination, notably in Burkina Faso. Seven clusters were activated, including the protection and shelter/non-food item (NFI) clusters led by UNHCR. At the regional level, UNHCR launched a strategy for the Sahel region to address protection challenges, building on the regional dialogue on protection and solutions held in Bamako in September 2019 and the Bamako ministerial declaration adopted in Geneva in October 2019 by the governments of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The strategy was elaborated in consultation with the concerned governments and other key stakeholders in the region.

#### *Nigeria situation*

As of 31 January 2020, there were some 2,614,000 IDPs and 285,000 refugees in north-western Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region, spread between Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The security situation throughout northern Nigeria remained volatile, especially around the Lake Chad Basin where humanitarian workers faced serious risks, as demonstrated by the attack on a humanitarian hub in Ngala in Borno State in January 2020. By the end of 2019, insecurity in the states of Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara in north-western Nigeria had driven over 40,000 refugees to the Maradi region in southern Niger. In response, UNHCR and its partners provided emergency assistance and relocated refugees from border areas, while conducting biometric registration, protection monitoring and provision of basic healthcare services to those with the most pressing needs.

Worsening insecurity in north-western Nigeria gave cause for concern that the instability in the Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad Basin areas could get entangled. Taking into consideration these new developments, UNHCR and the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) will launch an updated Nigeria Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) in March 2020, involving over 40 partners and bringing assistance to over 285,000 Nigerian refugees as well as host communities in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. UNHCR is promoting an out-of-camp approach and will contribute to strengthening education, health services and water infrastructure in the host areas for the benefit of all affected populations.

#### *Cameroon situation*

In 2019, UNHCR and its partners continued to support the Government to provide protection and assistance to the populations displaced internally by the violence in the south-western and north-western regions. In Nigeria, over 51,700 Cameroonian refugees were registered by UNHCR as 31 January 2020, and an estimated 8,000 have fled since then to border areas of south-eastern Nigeria. In 2020, UNHCR will pursue relocation of some the refugees to the Benue, Cross River and Taraba States with the support of the Nigerian authorities, promoting an out-of-camp approach and increasing the use of cash-based interventions to foster socio-economic inclusion and strengthen the resilience of both Cameroonian refugees and host communities.

#### *Central African Republic situation*

The security situation in the Central African Republic remained volatile. Nevertheless, UNHCR facilitated over 12,400 voluntary returns from Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo building on the tripartite agreements that were concluded with these three countries in 2019. There are over 600,000 refugees from the Central African Republic still living in neighbouring countries. UNHCR will continue to facilitate voluntary returns and collaborate with the authorities and key humanitarian and development partners to support their reintegration. UNHCR will also strengthen its coordination role in the protection, shelter and camp coordination and camp management (CCCM) clusters in support of the 600,000 IDPs in the Central African Republic and expand its presence with new offices in Bangassou, Bria and Mongoumba in 2020.

#### *Chad and West Darfur State*

Since December 2019, inter-communal tensions in West Darfur State have triggered a refugee influx in eastern Chad with over 16,000 arrivals as of end of February 2020. UNHCR is scaling up its operations in Chad and West Darfur State in 2020 by increasing emergency assistance to affected populations and registration of refugees, in order to respond adequately to the growing displacement crisis.

#### *Decentralization and regionalization*

As part of the global decentralization process, UNHCR's Representation in Dakar was scaled down at the end of 2019, and a new regional bureau covering 21 countries in West and Central Africa was established. Two multi-country offices in Cameroon and Senegal were also created in January 2020.<sup>1</sup> By equipping the regional bureau with stronger technical capacity to oversee and support the country operations, this new structure enhances delegated authority to the field to respond faster and more effectively. The new bureau will also allow for better engagement with regional actors and processes, including the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) coordinated from Dakar. The bureau will focus on the implementation of the policy on engagement in situations of internal displacement launched in 2019, strengthening UNHCR's IDP response and related cluster coordination responsibilities in the region. Establishing a robust enterprise risk management system, instilling a culture of integrity and accountability to affected populations and systematically fighting sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment throughout the region are also priorities

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<sup>1</sup> The UNHCR Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa covers Burkina Faso, Cameroon (multi-country office covering Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe), the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal (multi-country office covering Benin, Cabo Verde, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Togo).

for the regional bureau, alongside emergency preparedness and response, protection and solutions.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities (GSPs)**

### **Increasing opportunities for durable solutions**

#### *Voluntary repatriation and reintegration*

In 2019, close to 20,000 refugees repatriated with UNHCR's support across the West and Central Africa region, mostly to the Central African Republic (around 12,400 facilitated returns); as well as to Mali (3,770), Chad (110), Sudan (290), and to Côte d'Ivoire, where over 3,000 people returned in accordance with the 2018 roadmap for return and reintegration. In Nigeria, improvements in parts of the north-east, including Bauchi State, allowed for the repatriation of a first group of around 130 Nigerian refugees from Cameroon with the joint support of UNHCR and the two governments. In 2020, UNHCR will establish a monitoring system to gather information on potential return areas while negotiating a tripartite agreement with Niger and Nigeria. Some 416,000 IDPs also returned to their places of origin in the far-north region of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Mali and Nigeria. While reintegration is progressing in the Central African Republic, Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, the deteriorating situation in northern and central Mali is less conducive for sustainable return.

#### *Resettlement and complementary pathways*

In 2019, UNHCR operations in the region made over 4,120 resettlement submissions, including some 1,260 for refugees evacuated from Libya through the emergency transit mechanism in Niger. With around 2,800 places available in 2020, the need for resettlement in West and Central Africa considerably exceeds the existing opportunities. UNHCR will continue to prioritize the most vulnerable refugees for resettlement while also exploring alternatives, including family reunification and other complementary pathways.

#### *Local integration*

In 2019, the governments of the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau granted citizenship to more than 5,000 refugees. In Ghana and Togo, UNHCR is working with the respective governments to explore the possibility of providing long-term residence permits for refugees.

### **Favourable protection environment**

#### *Improving asylum systems*

In 2019, UNHCR continued to support West African countries in strengthening their asylum systems with significant improvements observed in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Togo. In Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, new decrees and legislations await parliamentary endorsement. The Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) decided to issue biometric identification cards to all citizens to promote freedom of movement. In this context, UNHCR will promote the harmonization of all asylum systems across the region. In 2020, a similar approach will be explored with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

#### *Combating statelessness*

In line with the Banjul plan of action on the eradication of statelessness (2017-2024), national action plans against statelessness were adopted by Niger and Côte d'Ivoire in September 2019 and January 2020 respectively. Building on the pledges made by ECOWAS and ECCAS member States during the high-level event on statelessness at UNHCR's Executive Committee meeting in October 2019, UNHCR advocated for the ratification and national implementation of the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons and the alignment of nationality laws with the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

#### *Fair protection process and documentation*

UNHCR supported governments in establishing national registration systems and continued to roll out its biometric identity management system (BIMS) in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR supported the provision of over 76,000 birth certificates, 15,000 nationality certificates and over 7,000 national identity cards to displaced populations and their hosts in 2019.

#### *Security from violence and exploitation*

In West and Central Africa, refugee and IDP women and children are disproportionately affected by violence and exploitation, including sexual and gender-based violence. There are currently over 3 million children displaced in the region, with over 9,300 children unaccompanied and separated and over 4,800 children enrolled with armed groups. In 2020, UNHCR will continue to support and roll out new guidelines for best interest determination procedures. Early identification, referral of persons with specific needs and targeted assistance are a priority for UNHCR but remain challenging. In the Sahel region, some 4,300 incidents of sexual and gender-based violence were reported in the first semester of 2019, while an estimated 19 per cent of women and girls within mixed movements were victims of rape during the year. Entrenched gender inequality, discriminatory attitudes and harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child marriage, were also widespread, particularly among forcibly displaced women and young girls. Exacerbated by armed conflict and the lack of livelihood opportunities, the risk of survival sex is high in organized and spontaneous settlements, as well as in host communities. In 2020, UNHCR will prioritize specialized services such as cash-based interventions, medical and legal assistance, safe spaces for refugee women and psycho-social support to better address sexual and gender-based violence. The discrimination and abuse faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex asylum-seekers is also a key concern. An analysis of their specific needs was undertaken in 2019, including a mapping of existing support mechanisms and gaps to inform UNHCR's approach on this issue.

#### *Basic needs and services*

In order to ensure access to basic needs and services while fostering the socio-economic inclusion of displaced populations, UNHCR is scaling up the use of cash-based interventions in West and Central Africa. In Burkina Faso alone, over \$1.2 million were disbursed to IDPs in the second half of 2019. In 2020, UNHCR will continue to expand its partnerships with financial service providers to deliver cash more effectively and engage with government and development partners to foster stronger linkages with national social protection schemes. The increase in the use of cash-based interventions for the provision of shelter and NFIs and other basic needs contributes to strengthening existing markets and local services, thereby also benefitting host populations.

### **Community empowerment and self-reliance**

#### *Education*

In 2019, UNHCR advocated for the increase in educational facilities and alternative learning solutions due to attacks and closures of schools and the general insecurity in the region. To respond to the educational needs of 3 million refugee and IDP children in West and Central Africa, UNHCR partnered with key actors including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank Group, the French Development Agency (AFD), the Global Partnership for Education, and the Education Cannot Wait initiative. All countries in the region have granted refugees access to their national education systems and, in addition, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali have included refugee children into their national education sector plans. UNHCR is also helping refugees access higher education and employment opportunities. In 2019, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund (DAFI) scholarship programme awarded tertiary scholarships to a total of

836 refugee students. In addition, 22 of these DAFI graduates were employed in the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

#### *Operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees*

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), UNHCR has engaged with a growing number of governments and partners to increase the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and promote better access to national education and health systems, legal documentation, as well as land and property. The first Global Refugee Forum held in December 2019 provided an opportunity to highlight inclusive approaches in West and Central Africa and make new pledges in this area. There are many good examples of this approach, including the construction of 140 houses for refugees and their hosts in Diffa, Niger as part of an innovative urbanization initiative led by the local authorities and supported by the European Union. In almost all countries in the region, public health services are available to both refugees and nationals alike. The Liberian Government has committed to grant 1,300 acres of land to 5,000 Ivorian refugees for shelter construction and agriculture to support their socio-economic inclusion. Cameroon provides public healthcare to refugees from the Central African Republic through a cost-sharing agreement between the Government and UNHCR. In Benin, the Government is committed to granting equal access to refugees to the whole education system, from primary school to university, and to open recruitment to certain sectors of the civil service. Supported by a growing collaboration with development actors, UNHCR will continue to work with governments to promote this inclusive approach in its health, education, economic inclusion and out-of-camp strategies to foster the self-reliance of forcibly displaced persons while strengthening the public systems for the benefit of host communities.

#### **External engagement**

##### *Strategic partnerships*

UNHCR is seeking new partnership opportunities to support comprehensive and inclusive responses to forced displacement, in line with the GCR. The International Development Association regional sub-window for refugees and host communities (IDA18), which is part of a strategic collaboration between UNHCR and the World Bank Group, is implemented in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This partnership will continue and expand in 2020, ultimately providing lessons learned that will guide collaboration with other development actors looking to address forced displacement in a more systematic manner. UNHCR is also strengthening its engagement with key regional organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, ECCAS and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), thereby facilitating dialogue and promoting coordinated approaches to regional issues.

##### *Inter-agency coordination*

UNHCR is reinforcing its inter-agency coordination role and fostering partnerships to ensure protection is at the centre of the humanitarian and development response in the region. In line with the policy on engagement in situations of internal displacement, UNHCR is seeking to ensure a harmonized approach for IDPs, refugee returnees and IDP returnees, while also considering the needs of local communities. As part of this effort, UNHCR is developing the Sahel regional protection monitoring tool, a harmonized transnational system which will also allow for comparative data between Sahel countries to support and inform cross-border planning and programming activities of all stakeholders.

### **C. Financial information**

The 2020 comprehensive needs budget for West and Central Africa, approved by the Executive Committee at its annual plenary session in October 2019, amounted to \$555.7 million. In 2019, the final budget was \$551.07 million. Of the activities carried out in 2019, the region mainly responded in the areas of protection and solutions, emergency response and reintegration (96 per cent). Around 40 per cent of the activities were related to

basic needs and essential services, such as shelter, education, health, basic and domestic items. In addition, UNHCR’s intervention around protection, security from violence and exploitation and durable solutions represented 29 per cent of the activities. In 2020, providing assistance to the five major situations: Cameroon, the Central African Republic, central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), central Mediterranean and Nigeria will be essential. In case of underfunding, UNHCR will be forced to be prioritize life-saving activities and finding durable solutions for the displaced will be impacted.

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