

**Executive Committee of the  
High Commissioner's Programme**

Dist. restricted  
2 March 2021  
English  
Original: English and French

**Standing Committee  
80th meeting**

---

**Update of UNHCR's operations in the East and Horn  
of Africa, and the Great Lakes region**

**A. Situational overview**

By the end of 2020, countries in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region hosted 4.69 million refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority from South Sudan (2.11 million), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (715,000) and Somalia (535,000). Uganda continues to host the largest population of refugees in Africa (1.45 million), followed by Sudan (1.06 million), Ethiopia (803,000) and Kenya (505,000). The region is home to around 60 per cent of the refugees and asylum-seekers on the continent.

In 2020, nearly 147,000 people were displaced across borders, with the majority seeking asylum in Sudan (80,000), Uganda (43,000) and Ethiopia (9,600). The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and associated containment measures resulted in an overall decline in arrivals as compared to previous years.

In addition, there are some 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, including in Somalia (2.65 million), Sudan (1.89 million), Ethiopia (1.82 million), South Sudan (1.6 million) and Burundi (128,000).

**Situational updates**

The conflict that started in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in November 2020 created a new refugee emergency in Sudan, with more than 60,000 people having arrived by January 2021. The response – taking place amidst logistical challenges and security concerns along the border – is focused on providing life-saving aid to new arrivals, while working with the government to establish new refugee settlements and move people away from the border. In Ethiopia, as humanitarian access progressively improves, protection and assistance efforts will need to be scaled up in 2021 for some 96,000 Eritrean refugees registered in Tigray and who have been greatly affected during the conflict, as well as some hundreds of thousands newly displaced Ethiopians.

The South Sudan situation remains the largest refugee crisis in Africa. Despite some progress, peace remains fragile and the humanitarian challenges, including acute food insecurity, mean significant aid is still required, while millions of refugees continue to live in difficult conditions in neighbouring countries. UNHCR and partners are working with the government to build favourable conditions for refugees and IDPs to return, focusing on capacity building of local authorities, creation of livelihood opportunities and community-led projects. While UNHCR has not promoted or facilitated return, since November 2017 over 350,000 South Sudanese refugees have returned on their own; therefore, more solutions-oriented planning and investment in rehabilitation and basic services in return areas are needed. The participation of refugees and IDPs in the National Dialogue Conference on Peace in November 2020 was an important step in inclusive consultation and dialogue. Close monitoring is required with the transfer of protection of civilian sites from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan to government authorities.

In Sudan, the ongoing political transformation, economic reforms and peacebuilding efforts have been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic, the new influx from Ethiopia and a recent flare up of fighting in West Darfur that displaced over 100,000 people. The government has

committed to stabilizing the situation to ensure the safety of civilians and has deployed the army. Further to the withdrawal of the United Nations - African Union Mission in Darfur, UNHCR is working with the government and other actors to develop a national protection of civilians strategy.

In October 2020, the Governments of Sudan and South Sudan, with support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and UNHCR launched a joint comprehensive solutions initiative for the 7 million forcibly displaced people of Sudan and South Sudan. Under the auspices of the IGAD Support Platform, the initiative seeks to galvanize international support towards the early recovery and longer-term peacebuilding and resilience needs of refugees, returnees, IDPs and host communities in Sudan and South Sudan, as well as in neighbouring countries hosting refugees from both countries. Consultations with refugees and IDPs will be critical to ensure an inclusive process, and the contributions of a range of United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders will be equally important.

In Somalia, persistent insecurity and climate shocks – including drought, floods, cyclones and desert locusts – exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in further large-scale displacement, protection risks and reduced levels of resilience. Despite the impact this had on access to affected populations, UNHCR continued to respond with emergency assistance. The complex political dynamics around national elections planned for 2021 will affect the evolving operational context. Developments in Yemen and Ethiopia may lead to an increase in refugee returns to Somalia.

Following the 2020 presidential elections in Burundi, refugees expressed increased interest in repatriation, with more than 40,000 people assisted to return despite COVID-19 challenges. Whereas UNHCR will continue to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Burundi refugees, returns are not being promoted. It remains crucial to continue to provide international protection to those who are currently not seeking to return, and to respect the right to asylum for new arrivals. The majority of Burundian refugees live in densely populated camps with inadequate shelter, health services and water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructures, compounded by reductions in food rations in several countries due to underfunding. Burundians who have repatriated continue to need reintegration support, including shelter and agricultural materials.

Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo fleeing unrest in the east of the country continue to arrive in the region. Whereas advocacy on the importance of access to asylum was successful in some cases, several instances of refoulement and rejection of asylum claims of Congolese refugees occurred in 2020. In 2021, opportunities for the return of some Congolese refugees to more stable areas of the country will be explored.

### **Mixed movements**

Mixed movements in the Horn of Africa continued, mostly from Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia, with associated risks of human trafficking. Onward movements of refugees to North Africa, the Mediterranean and Southern Africa are ongoing due to a variety of factors including lack of effective protection in first countries of asylum. Efforts will be made in 2021 to establish a more consolidated regional approach to mapping, monitoring and response to mixed movements.

### **Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19**

There have been a range of protection, health and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic. UNHCR and the World Bank are collaborating to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on refugees through socioeconomic surveys. Refugees in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda have participated in national phone surveys on the impact of COVID-19, led by national statistics offices and the World Bank. Data collection is expected to reach over 15,000 refugee households. Surveys have found that employment, livelihoods, poverty levels and access to education have all been dramatically affected, particularly for refugees in urban areas, in comparison to nationals. Refugees have resorted to various negative coping methods, including selling assets and having out-of-school children work. The results of the surveys are

being used to inform planning and policy responses of governments, as well as humanitarian and development actors.

## **B. Achieving the global strategic priorities**

### **Promoting a favourable protection environment**

Access to asylum, registration, refugee status determination (RSD) and documentation was hampered by COVID-19 mitigation measures, which also had a negative impact on the institutional capacity development interventions with States' asylum procedures. UNHCR advocated for special measures to allow asylum-seekers to be admitted, with positive results in South Sudan and Uganda. Some protection services were delivered remotely, along with increased reliance upon community-based structures.

UNHCR's mandate RSD activities were conducted remotely, notably at Rwanda's Emergency Transit Mechanism for evacuees from Libya. By the end of the year, registration activities had resumed to varying extents in all countries and State-led RSD activities were gradually recommencing.

Despite UNHCR's verbal and written demarches, incidents of refoulement were observed in 2020, notably to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique.

### **Child protection, preventing and responding to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse**

Efforts continue to promote the use of child-friendly procedures in responding to the needs of refugee children – including the identification of and special care for unaccompanied and separated children – while promoting their inclusion into national systems through regional partnerships.

UNHCR continues to emphasize the protection of women and girls, as well as men and boys, from gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). Despite a reduced monitoring presence, there are strong indications that both have increased during the pandemic. In 2021, operations will strengthen the capacity of staff, and partners, as well as community-based structures, and improve helplines for effective referral pathways and enhanced accountability to affected populations.

Capacity-building efforts to minimize the risk of SEA and ensure a rapid response will focus on improved reporting mechanisms, monitoring tools and training of all stakeholders. The new emergency in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has demonstrated the need for continued high vigilance to these issues, and the challenges of addressing them in insecure and changing environments.

### **Response to internal displacement**

The 2019 "Policy on UNHCR engagement in situations of internal displacement" continues to guide UNHCR's coordination responsibilities and operational response for IDPs in Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. In 2021, UNHCR will focus on re-establishing protection monitoring systems following COVID-19, pursuit of solutions – ensuring returns are principled and voluntary – and the alignment of national legislation with the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention).

In Burundi, broad-based consultations undertaken by the UNHCR-led protection cluster with stakeholders in the country have informed a new road map for strengthening protection in the IDP response in 2021.

In Ethiopia, UNHCR will extend its leadership role in the protection and other clusters to the Tigray region, and is working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and key non-governmental organizations to activate the camp coordination and camp management cluster, while continuing to monitor and respond to both new and existing internal displacement in other regions.

In Somalia, UNHCR's IDP response remains focused on protection monitoring, community engagement and risk communication as part of inclusion in national COVID-19 response, as well as emergency response to displaced populations affected by climactic events. UNHCR and the protection cluster are following developments with a new IDP Act which is expected to be enacted in the course of 2021.

In South Sudan, UNHCR's programme for IDPs in 2020 significantly scaled up shelter and other support for people in situations of localized violence, flooding and in the context of COVID-19. UNHCR has expanded protection reach in several States, allowing for increased engagement in 2021.

In Sudan, UNHCR has increased information management capacity to support the protection cluster with protection monitoring and operational responses, as well as in the durable solutions working group. In 2021 State-level coordination forums will support implementation of durable solutions action plans.

#### *Cash/multi-sector assistance*

Nearly 760,000 individuals received cash assistance in 2020, with some 265,000 receiving cash assistance specific to the COVID19 response. Operations have diversified their interventions according to needs such as shelter, hygiene, livelihoods, health, education, protection and repatriation. Cash transfers have been institutionalized via digital payments and operations undertook post-distribution monitoring and reviewed lessons for future initiatives.

Increased attention will be given in 2021 to financial and digital inclusion of people of concern, a vital component of attaining self-reliance and resilience. UNHCR will focus on further expansion of cash assistance, and support systems development, such as the roll-out of Cash Assist software. With other United Nations agencies, UNHCR will focus on joint programming (including targeting, platforms, delivery and monitoring) under the United Nations common cash statement.

#### *Food security*

Due to limited agriculture and livelihood opportunities, refugees are dependent on food assistance to meet their basic food needs. Funding shortfalls have resulted in the reduction of food aid for 3.3 million refugees (72 per cent of refugees in the region) in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Cuts range between 10 and 40 per cent of the standard ration. This has severely affected refugees' well-being with high levels of acute malnutrition, stunting and anaemia recorded, and resulted in a range of negative protection impacts such as child marriage and survival sex. The situation was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. While important, various parallel efforts underway to enhance livelihoods, self-reliance and opportunities for refugees to improve their food security remain relatively small-scale, and their impact is not commensurate to the need. More is needed in this regard, including endeavours with a medium and long-term focus.

#### *Global Compact on Refugees/Global Refugee Forum*

During 2020, host governments in the region, UNHCR, and a range of stakeholders made progress on commitments made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). The pandemic has limited multi-stakeholder consultations and slowed the implementation of many pledges. Despite these constraints, a number of countries have made progress through developing country-level action plans and roadmaps.

In the GRF digital tracking database, progress was reported on 45 pledges specific to the region – 15 are in their planning stages, 29 are being implemented and one reported as fulfilled. In preparation of the High-Level Officials' Meeting scheduled for December 2021, stock-taking events will be organized in the region.

The IGAD Support Platform continues with a focus on the three thematic declarations under the [Nairobi process](#), namely health; jobs and livelihoods; and education. In the fourth thematic area on returns, progress has been made with the start of a new solutions initiative in the context of the Sudan and South Sudan displacement situations. Technical meetings will culminate in a high-level ministerial and Heads of State summit planned for April 2021 that will review

progress on implementation of the Nairobi Declaration and related GRF commitments made by IGAD member States, and is expected to adopt a comprehensive plan of action to implement the Sudan and South Sudan solutions initiative.

#### *Durable solutions*

Most facilitated refugee returns were suspended in 2020 except those to Burundi. In total, some 165,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin during the year, including over 40,000 facilitated returns to Burundi and close to 118,000 self-organized returns recorded in South Sudan. Some 3,800 refugee returns were facilitated to Sudan, and 600 Somalis were assisted to return, while 800 more who returned on their own were provided with reception and reintegration support.

In 2021, UNHCR will continue to assist refugees who wish to return, while emphasizing the need for governments and humanitarian and development actors to work jointly to create conditions conducive to safe return and sustainable reintegration. Intention surveys will be conducted among refugees to inform planning, especially in the context of the Sudan and South Sudan solutions initiative.

Legal pathways to local integration are accessible to refugees under existing legislation in some countries in the region. Prior commitments towards the integration of long-staying refugee populations in the United Republic of Tanzania will be consolidated in 2021. UNHCR will also support governments to fulfil pledges aimed at greater socioeconomic inclusion.

Nearly 12,700 resettlement places were allocated to the region in 2020 and over 9,000 submissions were made (72 per cent). The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the resettlement process, with movement restrictions and remote working modalities resulting in a decrease in the identification, interviews and submissions of refugees in need of resettlement, as well as in the number of departures. These were suspended for several months but resumed in the third quarter of the year, with the departure of nearly 5,000 refugees. UNHCR hopes to see an increase in resettlement opportunities in 2021, including through engagement with an expanded range of resettlement countries, building on positive experiences with new partners such as France.

#### **Statelessness**

The year 2020 saw several pledging entities realizing their commitments made at the 2019 High-Level Segment on Statelessness at the opening of the seventieth plenary session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region endorsed its consolidated action plan to eradicate statelessness, expanding access to legal identity documentation for people at risk of statelessness. South Sudan adopted a national action plan to end statelessness. Kenya began the registration of individuals of Shona and Rwandan descent to grant them citizenship and resolve their protracted statelessness situation. In 2021, UNHCR will continue to support other stateless communities in Kenya. UNHCR will also support efforts underway in Uganda to include Margoli and other minority groups in the Constitutional list of indigenous communities, allowing their recognition as Ugandan citizens.

#### **Risk management**

In 2020, online risk management trainings were conducted, fraud prevention strategies and action plans were drafted, and specific risk reviews conducted for the Burundi voluntary repatriation and the Tigray situation in Ethiopia, to identify key risks and mitigation measures, as well as resources required.

All operations updated their risk reviews, accounting for changes in the operational context and to align them to priorities for 2021. The Regional Bureau is monitoring progress on agreed anti-fraud action plans. A new training programme will be rolled out to country operations in 2021 to equip risk managers to better detect and investigate fraud.

### **C. Financial information**

At the end of 2020, the East, Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region budget requirements of \$1.902 billion was funded at 47 per cent. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its serious impact on the lives and livelihoods of displaced communities, the Tigray emergency in Ethiopia, and other calamities that affected the region including floods, droughts and locusts infestations created additional funding needs in the region.

In 2021, the region will require \$1.881 billion to provide protection and assistance to refugees and displaced people, to continue the response to COVID-19 and its impact, to address the ongoing Tigray emergency and prospective returns to Burundi, South Sudan and elsewhere. In a region that hosts the largest number of refugees on the African continent, and where more than 80 per cent of refugees still reside in camps and settlements, more support is needed in 2021 to provide assistance and services while investing in inclusion and solutions.

---