

Agenda Item 3
Regional Bureau for the West and Central Africa region

The Chairperson of the Executive Committee, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

I come before the Standing Committee for the first time, in my capacity as the Director of the newly-established Regional Bureau for the West and Central Africa region. It is indeed a pleasure. As you know, the new Bureau was formally established on 01 Jan 2020. However, the preceding transition period in the last quarter of 2020 put us in good stead to begin to deliver on our responsibilities. We feel more confident about our readiness to provide the support and oversight to countries under our purview. Our presence in Dakar has brought us closer not only to UNHCR's operations but also to other regional actors based there. This has provided us a level of perspective and perceptiveness that we would not have previously enjoyed. It is possible to reach our field operations in a matter of a few hours, participate in regional fora, quickly consult with our regional partners: The onus is now on us to deliver with speed and agility to meet the needs of some 8 million of people who have been forced to flee their homes or are at risk of statelessness in the region.

We have seen a dramatic rise in the number of people forced to flee their homes:

Cette augmentation spectaculaire est liée principalement à la détérioration rapide de la situation sécuritaire dans le Sahel, et plus particulièrement, au Burkina Faso où aujourd'hui on compte environ 765,000 PDI – dont plus de 700,000 d'entre eux qui le sont devenus ces douze derniers mois. La population déplacée s'est multipliée par 16 par rapport à janvier 2019.

Allow me to highlight to you some of the key developments during the last six months:

In response to the alarming situation in the Central Sahel, the High Commissioner declared a regional emergency: a level 3 emergency declaration for Burkina Faso and level 2 emergency declaration for Niger and Mali to ensure scaled up response to these three countries. We are also taking emergency preparedness measures for the coastal countries – Togo, Benin, Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire – who may be affected by the crisis in the Sahel. We have revised our strategy for the Sahel and outlined key focus areas of intervention ensuring coherence with other actors and the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel.

We remain very concerned about the situation of some 6000 Malian refugees in the Mentao camp in the Djibo area in Sahel region of Burkina Faso. The security situation has closed all access to this region and pushed this group of refugees out of our reach. We are working with the Government of Burkina Faso for solutions to ensure an effective international protection of this group of refugees who are today in a desperate situation. We have also noted new threats to Malian refugees in the Dori province as well.

Further east, in Feb 2020, we scaled up our capacity to ensure emergency response in eastern Chad due to a new influx of some 16,000 Sudanese refugees who have been pushed out of their homes due to inter-communal tensions. While registration of the new arrivals has been launched, UNHCR, together with the local authorities and partners, identified a new site in Kouchaguine-Moura, and works were started soon after to prepare it to receive the new arrivals.. This new displacement has forced a temporary halt of the voluntary return movements that had been started in 2019 to bring back Chadians from Sudan and assist the return of Sudanese. By the end of the year, several hundreds of refugees had joined these return movements. We remain hopeful that the positive developments inside Sudan will provide an opportunity for us to re-launch the voluntary repatriation to Sudan.

We expect to continue supporting the return of refugees to the Central African Republic from neighboring countries of asylum. By the end of 2019, some 12,500 CAR refugees had been assisted to return home. We expect to help the return of some 25,000 refugees who have expressed an interest to return home through organized convoys. We will do more to support those returning through self-organized means and enhance community-based approaches to support return and reintegration. In collaboration with the authorities and key humanitarian and development partners, UNHCR will also strengthen its support to the over 600,000 IDPs in the Central African Republic and expand its presence in key hosting and return areas (with new offices especially Bangassou, Bria and Mongoumba).

By the end of the year, we had assisted some 3,000 Ivorian refugees to return home. Return convoys from Liberia are being organized to support several hundred refugees who have expressed a wish to return. We will continue to work with governments in the region to support the road map for the implementation of the Comprehensive Solutions for Ivorian Refugees

UNHCR continues to work with governments in the region to enhance identification of persons of concern within the mixed migratory flows and at the same time provide self-reliance and livelihood options to refugees and asylum-seekers. In 2019, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund (DAFI) scholarship programme awarded tertiary scholarships to a total of 836 refugee students. At the same time, by the end of the year some 835 refugees had been evacuated from Libya through the ETM in Niger. The government of Niger has kept this avenue open for this life-saving mechanism for people compelled to take the central Mediterranean Migration route. For this we remain very thankful to the Government of Niger. The success of this operation will continue to rely on the generosity of resettlement countries and our donor partners.

Before I conclude, let me speak briefly about the GCR.

In December 2019, during the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, countries from West and Central Africa made a total of 46 pledges focusing on protection capacity, jobs and livelihoods, education, health, energy and infrastructure and the search for solutions to forced displacement. Among many other pledges:

- Chad committed to increase the capacity of universities in refugee hosting areas by 10 per cent, to deliver work permit more systematically and to revise the legal framework to increase refugees' access to land to enhance self-reliance through more sustainable income generating activities. The government also intends to foster refugee inclusion by integrating them more systematically in national development plan and promote the "villagization approach" aiming at the integration of refugee settlements within local municipalities to reach the target of less than 50 per cent of refugees living in camps by 2023.
- Niger committed to ensure access to land to 40,000 refugees in mixed areas hosting both refugee and local populations;
- Liberia committed to grant 1,300 acres of land to 5,000 Ivorian refugees for shelter construction and agriculture to support their socio-economic inclusion.
- Benin committed to grant 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, especially education, to refugees with adequate qualifications.

. We will now work with countries to begin to implement these important pledges aimed at enhancing protection for people forced to flee – be they refugees or IDPs.

Thank you