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

Standing Committee
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Emergency preparedness and response

Summary

This paper presents developments in the areas of emergency preparedness and response since the last update provided to the Standing Committee in September 2020 (EC/71/SC/CRP.19). It describes UNHCR's strengthened capacity in this regard, including through efforts led by the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS), in the context of regionalization and decentralization. Outlining the growing number of emergencies across different regions in 2020, the paper highlights the response of UNHCR and its partners, including in supply and logistics aspects, as well as to challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It concludes by sharing areas of future engagement to advance UNHCR's emergency capacity and to build an integrated supply chain management.

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I. Introduction

1.   In 2020, UNHCR continued to prepare for and respond to new and ongoing emergencies in complex, multi-hazard environments. Ensuring operational capacity to provide a coordinated response was key in this regard, despite often facing access constraints, security considerations and challenges presented by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

2.   Partnerships and teamwork with other organizations, governments and persons of concern were crucial to UNHCR's ability to "stay and deliver", adapt its programmes and work towards ensuring the protection and life-saving assistance of displaced people.

3.   Strengthened regional leadership structures in the first year of implementation of UNHCR's regionalization and decentralization approach played an essential role in the quality and speed of its emergency responses. Direct support was provided to the regional bureaux and field operations, including capacity-building activities and the mobilization of human and material resources. UNHCR continued to facilitate coordination arrangements, such as undertaking joint senior level missions and regularly engaging with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Emergency Directors Group and the IASC Early Warning, Early Action and Readiness Working Group. This work was led by UNHCR's Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS).

4.   The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the lives of persons of concern to UNHCR in 2020. Consequently, the organization's activities, particularly in countries facing emergencies, were adapted to meet the growing needs. A coordinated response across humanitarian agencies was called for by the IASC-led Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19, in which UNHCR was an active partner. The Office urged governments and engaged with key partners to include persons of concern in their respective national and regional pandemic responses and supported national health systems to increase their capacities. Despite major logistical challenges, UNHCR continued its critical supply operations using global stockpiles, including the dispatch of medical items and personal protective materials including masks, gloves and gowns to its staff, partners and persons of concern.

II. Strengthening emergency preparedness and response capacity

A. Preparedness actions

5.   In 2020, UNHCR's High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness (HALEP) tool, a global repository of operations facing heightened risk of a new or escalated emergency, identified 29 such operations, including 14 countries facing potential refugee influxes, 10 with an increased risk of new internal displacement and 5 with both potential refugee and internal displacement risks. Most countries with heightened new risks were in Africa, followed by the Americas region. Humanitarian situations in some countries in Asia, Europe and the Middle East and North Africa region remained precarious.

6.   UNHCR's preparedness support focused on regional situations and country operations with elevated risks of displacement, including situations affecting internally displaced persons (IDPs). Countries with potential emergency risks were supported to undertake risk analysis, develop planning scenarios, identify urgent preparedness gaps and implement advanced preparedness measures. Operational preparedness guidance was available online through the "Preparedness package for refugee emergencies" and the "Preparedness package for IDP emergencies".

7.   Within the context of regionalization and decentralization, UNHCR further articulated the responsibilities, accountabilities and authorities related to its preparedness and emergency response. This included: i) the responsibility of country operations to identify hazards to be monitored through a risk-based analysis; ii) the oversight of country operations by regional bureaux from a regional and situational perspective; and iii) reviewing risk analysis and

preparedness actions. Submissions from country operations and regional bureaux are maintained in the HALEP global repository and updated as situations evolve, while annual risk reviews are validated by regional bureaux and reviewed globally. This system, together with the global repository, align and empower the regional bureaux in their role to strengthen preparedness in their respective regions. UNHCR has also streamlined its review of potential emergency risks within the annual risk review and related risk registers to avoid overlaps in the processes.

8.   UNHCR led inter-agency efforts to prepare for potential refugee emergencies, with a focus on situations which may evolve towards cross-border movements, including for the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia and Mozambique. In countries at risk of internal displacement, and under the leadership of the respective Resident Coordinator and/or Humanitarian Coordinator, UNHCR sought to fulfil its coordination function for the protection, shelter, and camp coordination and camp management clusters and the corresponding operational responses.

9.   The Office actively participated in the IASC Early Warning, Early Action and Readiness Working Group. The group, tasked to identify countries which may face a humanitarian crisis in the medium-term, identified 15 countries as "high risk" and "very high risk" in 2020. This assessment was escalated to the Emergency Directors Group to lead preparedness efforts with country operations to respond to the increased humanitarian needs.

10.   To enhance its capacity to respond to multiple complex emergencies in line with its cluster coordination commitments to IASC, and its refugee coordination role, UNHCR established internal rosters for inter-agency coordination and information management profiles. The rosters, which consider gender, language and geographical aspects, will be fully operational in mid-2021 and will allow UNHCR to have pre-identified colleagues to support inter-agency coordination in emergency situations from the outset.

B.   Capacity development

11.   To enhance the quality, effectiveness and impact of its emergency preparedness and response actions, UNHCR continued to facilitate training and provide operational guidance. Responding to the need for new modalities as a result of COVID-19, face-to-face training for the emergency response rosters was swiftly redesigned into online learning. The Workshop on Emergency Management and country-specific situational emergency training were provided virtually to 90 UNHCR and 31 partner staff. UNHCR further delivered the Emergency Team Leadership Programme on behalf of the IASC, with its Regional Centre for Emergency Preparedness (eCentre) in Bangkok, successfully training 176 government and humanitarian personnel from 23 countries, mainly from the Asia and Pacific region. The Office continued to update the online Emergency Handbook available internally and externally in Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Spanish, with the inclusion of additional languages under consideration.

III.   Delivery of emergency response

A.   Overview of emergencies and policy implementation

12.   During 2020, UNHCR activated internal emergency declarations in 26 countries. Of these, emergency activations in six countries had commenced in the previous year and concluded in the first half of 2020.

13.   In the Sahel region, an organization-wide level-3 emergency was declared for Burkina Faso, in addition to a level-2 declaration for Mali and the Niger, and a level-1 declaration for other neighbouring countries. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the level-3 emergency continued until the first half of 2020, contributing to assistance for the largest internal displacement situation in Africa. UNHCR's emergency responses provided critical support in Chad, Ethiopia, Iraq, Mozambique and the Sudan, as well as enhanced preparedness in Côte d'Ivoire and its neighbouring countries.

14.   As a result of the alignment of UNHCR's "Policy on emergency preparedness and response" with the IASC "Humanitarian system-wide scale-up" protocols in 2019, 21 emergency activations have automatically expired (after six or, exceptionally, nine months) in 2020. This allowed UNHCR to ensure that its resources were redirected to where they were most urgently needed. Notwithstanding the expiration of internal emergency activations, continued monitoring remained essential to ensure a timely scale-up if the situation would suddenly deteriorate, as well as to provide assistance where required.

15.   In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR declared a global level-2 emergency across the organization, mobilizing resources and capacities through a "whole-of-UNHCR" approach. In accordance with the applicable emergency procedures, additional operational flexibilities were introduced to country programmes in the areas of procurement, partnerships and human resources management. The overall response to help protect refugees and IDPs from COVID-19, in both camp and urban settings, was particularly challenging due to inadequate housing, crowded living conditions, the lack of access to clean water, and weak health infrastructure.

16.   Through the mainstreaming of age, gender and diversity into its work, and in line with its "accountability to affected people" principles, UNHCR adapted its programming, updated online guidance and tools, and expanded community engagement mechanisms throughout the pandemic. This approach facilitated the identification of needs and enhanced the protection response to sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence, and other forms of rights violations.

B.   Emergency deployments and partnerships

17.   The COVID-19 pandemic initially hampered UNHCR's ability to deploy staff to new emergencies due to border closures, difficulties in obtaining entry permits and travel restrictions. Some deployments commenced through remote working arrangements until travel was possible. Several emergency rosters were renewed, counting on the deployable capacity of 156 staff. Additionally, DESS's full-time emergency stand-by team, comprised of eight members, led complex emergency responses over the course of 738 days on mission. Except when COVID-19 travel restrictions were extremely severe, the emergency stand-by team continued its work on the ground.

18.   Overall, UNHCR facilitated 319 emergency deployments from the existing rosters. Pervasive travel restrictions, especially in the second quarter of 2020, reduced new physical deployments until they were resumed in September. The highest number of deployments were to Burkina Faso, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique and the Sudan.

19.   The Office maintained 18 bilateral emergency standby partnerships and continued to be actively engaged in the inter-agency Standby Partnership Network, which consists of 15 United Nations agencies and 54 partner organizations that deploy a range of experts to humanitarian emergencies. Experts deployed through UNHCR's standby partners provided targeted yet vital support to its emergency operations globally, particularly where specific technical profiles were needed. The recorded annual in-kind contribution by the emergency standby partners to UNHCR was higher than in previous years, amounting to $7.8 million. During the COVID-19 pandemic, standby partners demonstrated innovative approaches and much-needed flexibility by extending their support modalities to allow for remote and in-country deployments of international experts, where possible.

20.   UNHCR continued to closely coordinate its emergency responses at the global level through the IASC Emergency Directors Group, as well as at the country level. Proactive data- and information-sharing was an important element, enabled through UNHCR's operational data portal for refugee situations, its substantial contributions to information portals managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, such as the humanitarian data exchange, and increased collaboration with development actors.

C.   Supply management

21.   Despite global shortages and the near collapse of transport networks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR supplied $36.2 million-worth of emergency core relief items to new and ongoing emergencies from its seven global stockpiles. The Office also procured personal protective equipment and other critical items and services, amounting to $186.1 million, which were delivered to 95 operations.

22.   To maximize the potential of the supply chain during emergencies, UNHCR collaborated with sister agencies and partners through the Logistics Cluster, the United Nations Procurement Network, the United Nations Global Marketplace and the United Nations COVID-19 Supply Chain Task Force. The Office increased the usage of long-term agreements established by other United Nations organizations by more than 20 per cent when compared with 2019, resulting in improvements in efficiency, collaboration, service delivery and cost-effective tendering.

23.   UNHCR prioritized a new practice in its bidding process that helped to receive significantly lower prices, thereby freeing up resources to serve more people in need. In 2020, this change reduced the cost of centrally-procured core relief items by 16 per cent ($18 million) when compared with the previous practice.

24.   The operational capacity of UNHCR was reinforced in 2020 with virtual supply missions, providing support in the areas of procurement and logistics to the regional bureaux and operations. With regard to oversight, a compliance workshop on supply-related risks and the development of mitigation measures, involving 20 operations, was organized.

25.   To combine the opportunities of regionalization, and as part of its business transformation programme, UNHCR is reviewing its supply service delivery model. This multi-year work will focus on bolstering supplier engagement for market-shaping and responsiveness, strengthening sustainability and diversity in sourcing options, a review of the global stockpile network to increase speed and cost-effectiveness, and minimizing the carbon footprint to help ensure environmental sustainability, among other areas. The review is expected to result in increased efficiencies and simplified processes in UNHCR's supply arrangements.

IV.   Risks and challenges

26.   It is likely that there will be heightened risk and precarity in the context in which many of UNHCR's operations work in 2022. More countries have identified emergency scenario risks than in previous years, with one third of UNHCR's operations forecasting risks of deteriorating security and forced displacement as a result of the pandemic and its negative economic impact on households, as well as the tangible effects of climate change.

27.   The coming period may be one of multiple humanitarian emergencies and increased displacement, beyond or within borders, including those due to natural hazards. It is likely that the pandemic will continue to have a profound impact on countries and people, especially on those whose purchasing power has been reduced and who resorted to negative coping mechanisms, potentially leading to further socioeconomic hardship and uncertainty in overall security.

V.   Opportunities and priorities

28.   These trends give renewed impetus for UNHCR to strengthen its emergency preparedness and response measures, in line with the emergency policy key principles which call for actions that "do no harm" and act on a "no regrets" basis to respond to humanitarian needs in a safe and responsible manner in support of field operations.

29.   The Office is committed to making available forecasting and early awareness of global emergency risks and trends that are likely to cause population displacement. This work will bring together security threat analysis with meteorological and stringent data point analysis.

Including through its Global Learning and Development Centre, UNHCR remains engaged in building a strong and large capacity of internal emergency responders at different levels and with varied skill sets. Gender and geographical diversity are key considerations in this regard.

30.   UNHCR's emergency policy is due to be updated in 2022, which will provide an opportunity to further clarify the accountabilities and responsibilities of different managers in the context of regionalization and decentralization.

31.   In accordance with UNHCR's "Strategic Framework for Climate Action", additional emergency risks and natural hazards are to be identified by country operations, for which preparedness will be undertaken under the leadership of the Resident Coordinators and/or Humanitarian Coordinators. It also offers an opportunity to further articulate UNHCR's preparedness and operational engagement responsibilities related to disaster displacement. Similarly, the review of core relief items is envisaged to help make them more environmentally sustainable.

32.   UNHCR is committed to further enhancing its agility in supply planning, readiness and response to emergencies. With a new enterprise resource planning system (Cloud ERP) currently in development as part of the organization's business transformation programme, supply processes will be streamlined and standardized, and both its planning and visibility will be optimized. This is aimed at enabling UNHCR to have better capacity to make informed decisions about what is needed, and where, in a timely and resource-efficient manner. Furthermore, it will allow progress to be measured in real time.

33.   In order to optimize these opportunities and achieve its priorities, UNHCR continues to count on the support of States, particularly the members of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.

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