

# Emergency Management FAQs

**UNHCR's Policy on Emergency  
Preparedness and Response  
Explained**

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# 1. Overview of the Emergency Policy

## 1. What is new in the Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response?

[UNHCR/HCP/2023/01 Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) simplifies and streamlines our approach to emergencies. In particular, it introduces the following new elements:

**Preparedness:** Emergency preparedness processes are now aligned with Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) and Results-Based Management (RBM). Operations conduct emergency risk analysis at least once a year, within the Annual Risk Review. Those that identify a high risk of an emergency develop a scenario-based contingency plan, which is recorded in COMPASS.

**Key Principles:** Centrality of Protection and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse were clearly elaborated in the Policy. In recognition of the need to preserve and rehabilitate the natural environment in displacement settings, “environmental sustainability” has also been added as a key principle. Finally, the “no regrets” principle has been clarified further. If acting on a “no regrets” basis, Directors of divisions and regional bureaux, Representatives and Heads of sub-offices must adopt a risk-based approach, and document the justification for such actions.

**Level 1 emergencies:** The Policy expands Level 1 emergencies to include initial response, as well as proactive preparedness. Simplified procedures and access to financial resources apply equally to Level 1 emergencies now, for the duration of an emergency declaration.

**Simplified procedures:** The Policy introduces simplified procedures for supply, partnership agreements and human resources, in order to expedite life-saving assistance. Please click [here](#) for more information.

**Coordination:** Country-level coordination mechanisms are reinforced for refugee and IDP emergencies, in the line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the [Policy on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) respectively, and the Cluster System.

**Post-emergency phase:** The Policy introduces a post-emergency phase to facilitate planning for the transition to a regular operational response once the emergency declaration expires.

**Climate:** The Policy strengthens the predictability and effectiveness of UNHCR's engagement in emergencies triggered by natural hazards and climate change. In particular, in such a situation, it emphasizes the importance of strategic thinking and decision-making in the preparedness phase. The level of involvement in natural hazard-induced crises is linked to UNHCR's presence and operational capacity in the country, and expertise compared to other humanitarian actors.

**Roles and responsibilities:** The new Policy further clarifies roles and responsibilities at country, regional and global level. The Policy empowers and requires country operations to take the lead in emergency preparedness and response, with the support of regional bureaux and HQ divisions and entities.

**Institutional coherence:** The Policy is aligned with other new organizational policies and guidance, including the [Resource Allocation Framework \(RAF\)](#), [UNHCR's Strategic Framework for Climate Action](#), the [Policy for Evaluation in UNHCR](#), the [Recruitment and Assignments Policy](#), and the [UNHCR Policy on Cash-Based Interventions](#).

For more details, please see the [Overview of Key Simplifications and New Elements in the Policy](#) and the [Comparative Table of Emergency Levels](#). Both documents are available on the [Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal](#), managed by DESS.

## 2. What does the Policy say about engagement in climate and natural hazard-induced emergencies?

The Policy recognizes that the drivers and impacts of displacement are becoming increasingly complex and intertwined. This is especially the case in the context of climate change, which acts as a risk multiplier and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.

UNHCR does not just engage in humanitarian situations arising from conflict and human rights violations. As part of our inter-agency commitments, we must also deliver protection, assistance and solutions for people affected by humanitarian crises that are triggered by natural hazards and climate change. In light of this, the Policy strengthens the predictability and effectiveness of UNHCR's engagement in natural hazard-induced emergencies, by emphasizing the importance of strategic thinking and decision-making in the preparedness phase. The Policy stipulates that the level of UNHCR's involvement in natural hazard-induced crises is linked to our presence and operational capacity in the country, and our expertise compared to other humanitarian actors.

The Policy is aligned with [UNHCR's Strategic Framework for Climate Action](#), and references collective UN system objectives on climate action and disaster risk reduction.

# 2. Preparedness

## 1. How should operations prepare for an emergency?

Pro-active emergency preparedness is crucial for a timely and effective response. Preparedness procedures are aligned with the Organization's Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) and Results-Based Management (RBM).

All country operations undertake risk analysis for new or escalated emergencies at least once a year as part of the Annual Risk Review. Operations determine a ranking of high, medium or low for each agreed emergency scenario, based on its likelihood and potential impact. Operations continuously monitor the identified emergency risks and update the Operational Risk Register accordingly.

If an operation identifies a high risk of an emergency, they develop a scenario-based contingency plan in collaboration with government counterparts and other partners. As of the second quarter of 2023, contingency plans will be recorded in COMPASS. As part of the contingency planning process, operations identify key preparedness measures that would need to be implemented in order to enable the planned emergency response. These measures can include establishing frame agreements, identifying potential financial service providers, pre-selecting a pool of potential partners through a Call for Expression of Interest, and assessing the potential partners' capacity.

In addition to UNHCR-specific preparedness, country operations also participate in inter-agency preparedness. Please click [here](#) for more information.

An updated Preparedness Guidance, aligned with the new Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response, will be available soon on the [Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal](#).

## 2. What Is the difference between UNHCR-specific preparedness, and inter-agency preparedness?

In addition to UNHCR's own emergency preparedness, the Organization participates in inter-agency preparedness.

In refugee situations, UNHCR country operations lead inter-agency contingency planning, jointly with governments wherever possible, and in close partnership with other UN agencies, development institutions, local, national and international NGOs.

In all other situations of forced displacement, including internal displacement caused by conflict and natural hazards, and mixed situations, UNHCR engages in inter-agency preparedness efforts. These activities are led by the Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinator, and include discussing and confirming leadership for relevant working groups, sectors and clusters within the UNCT/HCT.

# 3. Declaration and Duration

## 1. What does UNHCR mean by a “declared emergency”?

UNHCR's definition of an "emergency" is composed of two criteria. Firstly, there is a humanitarian crisis or disaster which either threatens to cause new forced displacement, loss of life or other serious harm, or which significantly affects the rights or well-being of displaced and stateless persons, unless immediate action is taken. Secondly, for an "emergency" to be declared, the humanitarian crisis must demand exceptional measures because current government and UNHCR capacities are inadequate for a predictable and effective response. The declaration of an emergency level is based on a country operation's analysis of the situation, as well as its existing preparedness and response capacity.

A country may have multiple emergency declarations at the same time, if the crises are geographically or contextually different from each other – like in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2021, when there was a Level 2 emergency for the refugee influx from the Central African Republic, and a Level 2 IDP emergency following the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano. A humanitarian crisis may also require emergency declarations in several country operations, as in the Ukraine situation, where UNHCR declared a Level 3 emergency for the IDP situation within Ukraine, and Level 3 refugee emergencies for Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.



## 2. What is the difference between Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies?

UNHCR may declare one of three emergency levels, depending on the magnitude, complexity and consequences of a humanitarian crisis compared to the existing capacity of the country operation(s) and regional bureau(x) concerned.

A Level 1 emergency is declared when a country operation must enhance preparedness and/or commence an initial response, while the current capacity of the country operation(s) is insufficient. A Level 1 emergency is declared by the AHC-O, through a communication to the Senior Management Committee and respective Representative(s).

A Level 2 emergency is declared in a rapidly evolving humanitarian situation when a country operation faces significant gaps in resources, staffing and expertise, and additional support and resources from the relevant regional bureau are vital for the operation to respond and assume an appropriate and effective coordination and operational role. L2s are declared by the High Commissioner via Broadcast.

A Level 3 emergency signifies an exceptionally serious situation in which the scale, pace, complexity, and consequences of the crisis significantly exceed the existing response capacities of the country operation and regional bureau. Therefore, an institutional, whole-of-UNHCR response is necessary for UNHCR to deliver effectively and at scale. L3s are declared by the HC via broadcast.

For Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies, there are additional support instruments aimed at facilitating a robust institutional response. These instruments provide an opportunity to identify challenges and recommendations, while giving the operations and regional bureaux a forum to set out what resources and support they require. For more information on these support instruments (such as the Senior Level Working Group and Joint Senior Level Missions), please see the Additional Support Instruments section above.

There are some elements of the Policy that apply to all three emergency levels, including:

- Simplified procedures, e.g. for supply and partnership agreements;
- Option to request deployments and time-bound missions;
- Possibility to request allocations from the Emergency-reserved Budget (maximum USD 10 million per country operation).

For more details, please see the Comparative Table of Emergency Levels on the Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal, managed by DESS.

### 3. For how long does an emergency declaration remain in force?

All emergency declarations expire automatically after 6 months. For a Level 1 emergency, there is no possibility of extension. However, in exceptional circumstances, Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies can be extended for a further three months. The maximum duration of a L2 or L3 emergency is therefore nine months.

The High Commissioner can increase the level of an emergency in case of a sudden deterioration in the humanitarian situation. In such exceptional circumstances, the new declaration supersedes the previous declaration.

### 4. Who Declares an Emergency?

The declaration of an emergency level is based on a country operation's analysis of the situation and of its existing preparedness and response capacity. The regional bureau(x) and DESS recommend declaring an emergency level depending on the scale, complexity, and consequences of the humanitarian situation. Based on this recommendation, the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations (AHC-O) declares a L1 emergency internally through a communication to the Senior Management Committee and respective Representatives. Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies are declared by the High Commissioner, on the advice of the AHC-O, through a UNHCR Broadcast message to all personnel.

## 5. Is there a difference between the IASC humanitarian system-wide Scale-up Activation and UNHCR declared emergencies?

Yes, there is a difference.

The IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation is a mobilization of resources and operational capacity across the UN system, beyond standard levels, to respond to critical humanitarian needs. A Scale-Up is issued by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), in consultation with the concerned RC/HC and IASC Principals, and is in place for 6 months (with the possibility of a 3-month extension in exceptional circumstances). A Scale-Up Activation applies only to situations that do not involve refugees, for instance IDP situations.

UNHCR's internal emergency declarations are guided by the organization's [Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#), and declared by the High Commissioner (for Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies) or the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations (for Level 1 emergencies). UNHCR declares internal emergencies for both refugee and IDP situations independently from a IASC Scale-Up activation. In emergencies involving refugees, UNHCR has the mandate to prepare for, lead and coordinate the response under the [Refugee Coordination Model](#) (RCM). When an IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation is issued, UNHCR must fulfil its commitments as an IASC member and upscale its coordination and operational response. This may include declaring or extending an internal UNHCR emergency, if deemed to be appropriate and in line with UNHCR's Emergency Policy.

## 6. What is the process for declaring an emergency?

For detailed information on how a UNHCR emergency is declared, please consult the SOPs for UNHCR Emergency Declarations, available on the Guidance and Tools page of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal.

In summary, there are four main steps. Firstly, the operation must conduct risk analysis and develop a scenario-based contingency plan for every high risk of an emergency it identifies. If the situation deteriorates, the operation should raise a preliminary alert, based on its risk analysis.

Secondly, the operation, through the regional bureau, requests an emergency declaration. This involves providing DESS with a written justification, including a short description of the crisis and a summary of planned actions.

Thirdly, an emergency declaration is drafted, based on the justification provided.

The fourth step is decision-making and communication. Once the declaration has been agreed upon between the country operation, regional bureau and DESS, the latter shares the draft with the Office of the AHC-O. Level 1 emergencies are declared by the AHC-O through a communication to the Senior Management Committee, and Level 2 and 3 emergencies are declared by the High Commissioner via Broadcast.

# 4. Coordination

## 1. Is there a difference between coordination mechanisms for refugee and IDP emergencies?

Yes, there is a difference. For refugee emergencies, the Representative ensures that the arrangements set out in the [Refugee Coordination Model](#) (RCM) are established. For IDP emergencies, the UN Cluster approach applies, and the UNHCR operation should contribute to the UNCT/HCT's efforts to formulate and deliver collective outcomes. Mixed situations are governed according to the [Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situation Coordination](#).

## 2. How does UNHCR engage in the cluster system?

At the global level, UNHCR leads three clusters: the Global Protection Cluster, the Global Shelter Cluster and the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM).

At the country level, UNHCR's leadership of the clusters depends on the profile of the emergency. In conflict-related internal displacement, UNHCR assumes leadership of the Protection, Shelter and CCCM clusters. In cases of natural hazard-induced internal displacement, UNHCR assesses its capacity for an operational response and cluster leadership. If UNHCR is already leading a cluster for a conflict-induced emergency when a natural hazard event occurs, that leadership must be maintained.

### 3. What coordination mechanisms apply in mixed situations?

In a mixed situation, various different populations may require protection and assistance. Several documents shed light on the country-level coordination arrangements in mixed situations, which can involve refugees, internally displaced persons, host communities, and migrants.

The [2014 Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice](#) clarifies leadership and coordination arrangements in mixed IDP and refugee situations, and describes the practical interaction of the IASC system and the UNHCR Refugee Coordination Model.

The [2022 IOM/UNHCR Framework of Engagement](#) and the [2019 Joint Letter from IOM and UNHCR on the Collaboration Between the Two Organizations](#) reiterate the distinct roles and coordination responsibilities of IOM and UNHCR to enable an effective operational response in cases of mixed movement involving refugees and migrants.

# 5. Additional Support Instruments

## 1. What additional support instruments are available?

Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies benefit from additional support instruments. These are designed to identify areas where further support may be required, and help coordinate and deliver the emergency response.

Once an L2 or L3 emergency is declared, the first support instrument to be convened is the Senior Level Working Group (SLWG). The SLWG is convened within two weeks, to ensure that the necessary organizational capacities are in place to support a timely and effective response. It is led by the AHC-O, and consists of the directors of the relevant regional bureau and HQ divisions, and the AHC-P.

Within four weeks of an L2 or L3 declaration, a Joint Senior Level Mission (JSLM) takes place. The Directors/Deputy Director of the regional bureau and DESS conduct a high-level review of the immediate response to the emergency, including its protection and operational strategy. After the mission, the JSLM members provide a briefing and written report with a summary of findings and recommendations to the AHC-O and the AHC-P.

For Level 2 and 3 emergencies, the regional bureau and DESS establish an Emergency Cell (EC) to coordinate support for the country operation. Participation in the EC is limited to key personnel from the operation, bureau, DESS and relevant HQ divisions. The EC may also decide to establish subject-specific cells, such as for Human Resources or Supply.

## 2. Are there any special support instruments for Level 3 emergencies?

Both Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies involve a Senior Level Working Group (SLWG), Joint Senior Level Mission (JSLM) and Emergency Cell. In addition to this, three months after a Level 3 emergency is declared, the regional bureau and DESS undertake a Real-Time Review (RTR). The aim is to assess the response to date, monitor the application of the Policy, and recommend any necessary adjustments. An evaluation of the emergency response is conducted no later than 15 months after a Level 3 declaration, managed by the Evaluation Office.



# 6. Resource Mobilization

## 1. What simplified procedures are available once an emergency has been declared?

The new Policy introduces simplified procedures in areas such as supply, partnership agreements and access to human and financial resources. These emergency procedures are applicable to all emergency levels, for the entire duration of an emergency declaration.

For **supply**, the Request for Quotations ceiling and the procurement approval authority of the Local Committee on Contracts is USD 750,000. The procurement approval authority of the Representative is USD 250,000, and the minimum floating periods for formal method of solicitation processes can be shortened.

For **partnership agreements**, these include waiving a Call for Expression of Interest, registration on the UN Partner Portal within three months of signing an agreement, and using Letters of Mutual Intent (LOMIs) to commence activities.

For **human resources**, the regional bureau Director or the Representative have the authority to redeploy Fast Track international positions within a country or across countries covered by an emergency declaration. When recruiting temporary personnel, the Representative and Heads of sub-office also have the authority to waive the desk review of applications with a clear justification of why a certain candidate was chosen. Furthermore, the minimum relevant working experience requirement is reduced, and reference checks can be completed within six months from the date of appointment.

## 2. How are deployment and staffing needs met in an emergency?

At any point during a declaration, regardless of the emergency level, country operations can request missions and different types of time-bound deployments through DESS, in coordination with DHR.

DESS can deploy personnel from the Senior Corporate Emergency Roster (SCER), the Emergency Response Team (ERT) roster, and through standby partnership arrangements. If necessary, DESS can deploy a member of its Emergency Surge Team to support the operation. For a Level 3 emergency, DESS automatically deploys a Principal Emergency Coordinator or another senior member of the division, together with a multi-functional support team.

Operations with a declared emergency should start planning as soon as possible the transition from emergency deployments to more stable staffing arrangements. This may include temporary assignments or appointments and Fast Track positions. For the Fast Track, vacancy announcements are normally issued within the first eight weeks of an emergency declaration.

To expedite the recruitment of temporary personnel, the Representative and Heads of sub-office can waive the desk review of applications with a clear justification of why a certain candidate was selected. They may select candidates directly from i) local or international talent pools; ii) staff-in-between-assignments; iii) staff members in the last months of their Standard Assignment Length; and iv) on a current temporary assignment.

### 3. What financial resources are available for operations with a declared emergency?

Once an emergency has been declared, regardless of the emergency level, country operations can request additional financial resources from the Emergency-reserved Budget. The regional bureau Director has the authority to transfer appropriations of up to USD 5 million per country from the Operational Reserve and/or to allocate OL from the Emergency-reserved Budget. For requests of up to USD 10 million per country, the authority sits with the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. Allocations from the Emergency-reserved Budget are cumulative throughout the emergency declaration, up to a maximum amount of USD 10 million per country. Allocations should be transferred no later than 48 hours from the date of the request.

### 4. What material resources can be made available for an emergency?

When country operations and regional bureaux require material resources for an emergency response, they may request these from DESS. The Global Stock Management is maintained to provide Core Relief Items (CRIs), security equipment and other materials as needed. In addition, the Global Fleet Management (DFAM) in cooperation with DESS will ensure expeditious delivery of vehicles to the operational area.

# 7. Post-Emergency Phase

## 1. What happens when an emergency declaration comes to an end?

The expiry of an emergency declaration does not necessarily imply that the crisis has come to an end. Rather, it means that preparedness actions are in place or that the operational response has been scaled up and reasonably stabilized, to the extent that additional resources and special procedures are no longer required.

Towards the end of an emergency declaration, the country operation(s), regional bureau, DESS and relevant HQ divisions conduct an operational review. This should take into account the relevant protection and operational strategies, framework and leadership arrangements; operational footprint, structure and security. This includes a careful review of offices and staffing arrangements in line with allocated financial resources and projected funding levels.

Level 1 emergencies automatically expire after six months, and the operation enters the post-emergency phase. For Level 2 and 3 emergencies, however, the outcome of the review informs the next steps, i.e. whether to transition to a regular operational response or to request an exceptional three-month extension of the emergency declaration. If the operation wishes to extend, the regional bureau should send a written request to DESS before the initial six-month declaration expires. The request should include a brief update of the situation and justification, as well as key new or outstanding scale-up or response deliverables.

Once a declaration expires, a new emergency may be declared again at a later date, if the situation requires.

For more detailed information, please see the [SOPs on UNHCR Emergency Declarations](#).